

時雨沢恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト：黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION: KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

イクストーヴァの一番長い日へ上

リリアと トレイズ Ⅲ



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リリア・シュルツ

十五歳。
ロクシアーク連邦（東側）首都に住む
上級学校三年生。
母はアリソン、父親は亡きヴィルヘルム・シュルツ。
特技はベゼル語会話と飛行機の操縦。
本名はとても長い。

トラヴァス少佐

三十五歳。
ベゼル・イルトア王国連合
（西側）の軍人。
大使館に勤める駐在武官で
秘密情報部員。
要するにスパイ。
アリソンの現在の彼氏であり、
正体は……。



アリソン・シュルツ

三十五歳。
ロクシェ空軍大尉。
現在はテスト飛行士として活躍中。
首都のアパートで
娘リリアと二人暮らし。
寝起きは相変わらずとても悪い。

トレイズ

十六歳。
フランチェスカ女王とベネディクトの息子。
イクス王国の王子だが、
諸事情により王子ではない。
メリエル王女は双子で、
どちらが年上かと係争中。
正体を知らないリリアとは幼なじみ。



フランチェスカ女王(フィオナ)
& ベネディクト

三十八歳と四十二歳。
イクス王国の現女王と、
“壁画発見の歴史的英雄”だったその夫。
イクス王国にてのんびりと生活中。

Lillia Schultz: 15 years old. A third-year secondary school student who lives in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Her mother is Allison, and her father is the late Wilhelm Schultz. Lillia's specialties are Bezelese and flying aeroplanes. Her full name is extremely long.

Treize: 16 years old. He is the son of Queen Francesca and Sir Benedict. Although Treize is a prince of Iks, certain circumstances prevent him from claiming royal status. He and his sister Meriel constantly argue about which one of them is the older twin. Treize and Lillia are childhood friends, but she does not know his true identity.

Allison Schultz: 35 years old. She is a captain in the Roxcheanuk Confederation Air Force. Allison currently works as a test pilot, and lives with her daughter Lillia in an apartment in the Capital District. She is still a heavy sleeper.

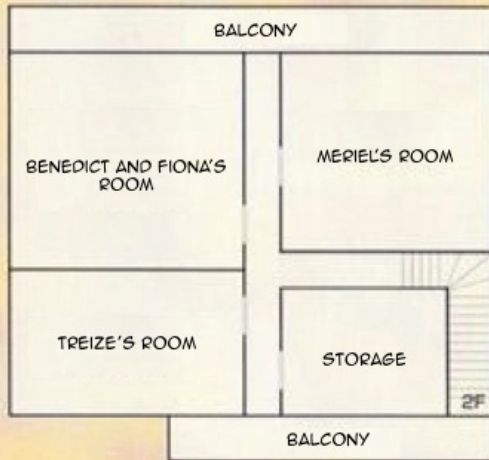
Major Travas: 35 years old. He is part of the Royal Army of the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. He is a military attaché who works in the embassy, and is part of the intelligence agency—in other words, he is a spy. Major Travas is currently Allison's boyfriend, but in reality—

Queen Francesca (Fiona) & Benedict: 38 and 42 years old, respectively. Francesca (Fiona) is the current Queen of Ikstova, and Benedict her husband is the Hero of the Mural. They are currently living a relaxed life in Iks.

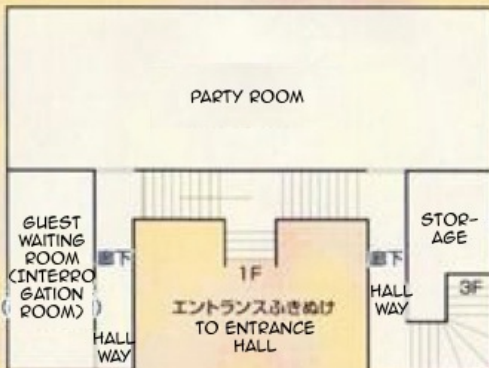
【イクス王室離れ・簡略図】

ROYAL VILLA OF IKSTOVA
(SIMPLIFIED BLUEPRINTS)

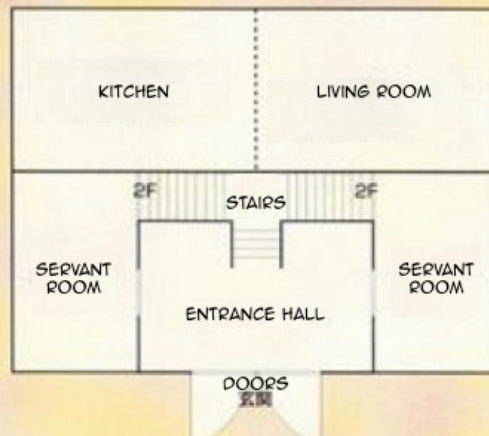
3F



2F



1F



リリアと トレイズ III

イクスストーリーヴァの一番長い目へ上

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- 105 第三章「祭りの火」
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The eighteen years were long.
But the nineteenth year will never come.
We have already resolved.
To do what we must.

Chapter 1: The Things That Led Up to That Day

Dear Treize,

Are you well? I am. End.

That made for a very short letter, so I will write a little more. My relaxing summer vacation has ended and a new term has begun. I am attending secondary school as usual. I sent Carlo a letter not long ago, but he has not replied. Did you by any chance say something to him before we parted ways?

Lillia Schultz

Dear Miss Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz,

It has been a while. This is Treize.

I am well, but I cannot say the same for my poor motorcycle—I drove it to death and the engine finally gave out.

As I already wrote in my previous letter, I owe you so much for what happened this summer. Please convey my thanks to Allison as well.

About Carlo: he might not know how to read and write yet, so give him some time to send you a reply.

Autumn is almost over in Ikstova now. The photo on this postcard was taken by my mother and printed in the village photo studio.

Treize of Ikstova

Dear Treize,

Wow! That's a great picture! Is your mother a professional? I asked Mom, but she wouldn't tell me. Here's a Capital District postcard in return—a picture of the bustling city. Don't you miss it?

Lillia (who has midterms coming up and shouldn't actually have time for this stuff)

Dear Miss Lillia Schultz,

I love you! I love you very much!

I'm sorry for the sudden nature of this letter.

But I could not hold myself back any longer.

I've rewritten this message so many times that the letter is going nowhere; so I am being very brief.

Any response is fine by me, so please reply soon.

I am prepared to accept even a rejection.

Archer Bernardo, third-year.

P.S. We took history class together last year! Do you remember me?

“Meg? Miss Strauski?”
“Hm? What is it, Lillia?”
“Is there a guy named Bernardo in this class?”
“Er...he’s not here yet, but yeah.”
“Could you give this to him? I don’t know what he looks like.”
“Sure, but...is this a letter? A *love* letter?”
“A *reply* to a love letter.”
“Oh my goodness!”
“Obviously I’m turning him down. Now give it to him quick and don’t tell anyone.”
“So that’s why you were talking to me in Bezelese... All right. Just leave it to me.”
“Thanks, Meg. I’m counting on you...”
“You didn’t sleep well, Lillia?”
“I never thought I’d end up looking through a dictionary to write the thing without making any mistakes...man.”
“Oh my.”
“Stuff happened, and I just didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.”
“Good job, Lillia.”

To the Schultz family,

Hello, this is Treize. I am writing on behalf of my mother. Have the two of you made plans for the winter holidays yet? If you'd like, please come visit Ikstova for the end-of-year festivities. We will welcome you with open arms.

Lillia,

Mother was very pleased when I gave her your compliments. She says she would like to meet you if she has the chance. This is also one of her photos, of the Central Mountain Range as seen from Slankalans.

Treize of the Ikstova Tourism Association

“Hey, Mom. Hella sorry to drop this on you straight from school, but check this out.”

“What is it, Lillia? You’ve got a scary look on your face and you sound like you’ve been hanging out with the wrong crowd.”

“I got this letter from Treize. Look.”

“Hm? Let’s see... I see, I see. I don’t get sweaty in my flight suit when I walk over to the aeroplanes anymore, so it must be about time to plan for the holidays.”

“That’s a funny sense of the seasons you’ve got, Mom. So what are we gonna do?”

“What would you like to do, Lillia?”

“...I’ll let you decide. You can get a long vacation from work, right?”

“If I sign up for one. If not, just the last few days of the year.”

“Do it! We’ll think about the rest later.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“No saluting.”

“Got it! So Lillia, what’s for dinner tonight?”

“I haven’t decided yet. ...Maybe meat, to get us pumped up?”

“Yeah! There’s nothing like a carnivore’s diet.”

“Okay! Meat it is.”

“Huzzah! You’re the best, Lillia!”

“Huzzah! All hail meat! ...Mom?”

“Hm?”

“We sound like idiots.”

“Oh, it’s not like anyone’s watching.”

“True.”

Dear Treize,

Mom. Me. You. End of the year.

Dear Miss Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz,

This is Treize, wondering if you could have made that letter any shorter.

It actually looks very scary, the way you wrote. I almost thought it was a threat.

Allison sent my mother a telegram, so we have a schedule set. This time, we'll meet at Kunst instead of the usual valley. As always, leave the lodgings to me.

If I remember, this is the first time you and Allison are coming to Ikstova at the end of the year. The last day of the twelfth month in Ikstova is a day of dazzling celebration, and feels like the longest yet shortest day of the year. 'Revelry' does not even begin to describe the festivities. The streets of Kunst are bustling until dawn. There are open-air stalls and performances, and it will be an exciting time. We'll be waiting for your arrival.

We just got our first snowfall here in Ikstova. Over 30 centimeters, in fact. And it's only going to get heavier from here on out. The world will be blanketed in white for months to come.

Treize of Ikstova

The 19th day of the final month of the year 3305 of the World Calendar.

The capital of the Roxcheanuk Confederation was famous for its warm winters relative to its latitude. This was thanks to the currents and seasonal winds blowing warm air into the area.

The capital, situated in the northeastern area of the continent, was officially known as the Special Capital District—a self-governing region independent of other member states of the confederation.

The National Library next to the civic center was a massive building with five wings spreading out around it, and was affectionately called ‘The Starfish’.

It was in one wing of that library, between the shelves so high they could kill several people with ease if they fell, that Major Travas reclined on a sofa and read a book.

He was a man in his mid-thirties of average height and average build. He wore oval frameless glasses, and his hair was between short and slightly long. Travas was dressed in a plain navy suit with a tie. Folded next to him in a neat pile were his brown trench coat, winter hat, and gloves.

It was just before morning tea time. Snow was falling softly outside the windows, but the interior was warm. The library was almost completely empty, as it usually was on weekdays just after opening hours.

The sofas continued in a line for about 50 meters, occasionally interrupted by aisles, but the only people seated were Major Travas and an old man about 20 meters away.

Major Travas was holding a book made of clearly cheap paper. The title read, ‘Mystery Creature’s Existence Confirmed! Latest photos inside’ in Roxchean, the official language of the Confederation. Major Travas flipped quickly through its pages, his brown eyes rapidly scanning the words.

As time passed peacefully, another man stepped in.

He was in his late forties and had an athlete’s build, and wore a plain grey suit. The face under his short-cropped blond hair was a stern one. In his hand was a folded newspaper.

The man’s footsteps resounded as he passed the shelves, slowing as he neared Major Travas and finally coming to a stop just 2 meters from him.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked stoically.

Major Travas, who was already looking up at the man’s approach, smiled and replied, “Yes.” The man walked over to the empty sofa on the major’s right and took a seat. He threw a glance at the cover of Major Travas’s book before turning to his own newspaper, seemingly uninterested in conversation.

Major Travas returned to his book as well. The silence was punctuated by nothing but the sounds of pages being turned.

It was about when the long hand of the clock on the wall had made a quarter revolution around the face that the old man slowly rose from his seat. He placed his finished book on the returns cart and left.

The man in grey said nothing as he folded up his newspaper irritably and tossed it to his right. For a moment, something seemed to bulge at his left side under his suit. He was wearing a shoulder holster with a large handgun.

“So,” the man said, his eyes facing forward. Major Travas’s eyes stopped. The man continued. “What are your people up to this time?”

Major Travas did not look at the man either, but replied matter-of-factly, “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Don’t play dumb. It looks like your taste in books isn’t the only joke around here,” the man growled. “Twelve of the newest submachine guns—along with so much ammo a man couldn’t carry it on his own—were sold over the past three months. Along with the latest in miniature radios and suppressors for automatic handguns. The buyers were all individuals, but the orders, deposits, and receipts were fiddled with just right that we couldn’t track them. Clearly this is the work of a single group—a group of people who’re particularly good at these tricks. Yours.”

It was a very bold accusation, even considering the absence of eavesdroppers. Major Travas was a little surprised when he finally turned to the man. The man met his gaze.

“You’re accusing the wrong person,” Major Travas said firmly.

The man was quick to retort. “I heard you and your little gang got your hands on the magazines from those models this summer in the middle of that crazy show you put on at the lake.”

“And indeed we did. But we disposed of the magazines and filed an official report about our reasons.”

“I’m not here to listen to stuff I already know. But you people have always used Roxchean weapons when you pulled things in Roxche. Clever, I’ll give you that. Procuring supplies locally to act like locals,” the man said, and suddenly changed the subject. “When I was just born, my country and yours were at war. Before I started primary school I was taught to kill anyone from cross-river on sight.”

“I see,” Major Travas replied tersely.

“When I see you bastards reading on a sofa in the National Library, my hands start tingling for a gun.”

“I see.”

“It bugs me that I can’t scratch that itch until I get evidence of your misconducts. Don’t you agree, Major Travas of the Sou Be-Il Royal Army?”

“Perhaps,” Major Travas replied with a sincere smile. The man’s glare did not soften.

“I despise you Westerners. Especially you ‘noble’ ones.”

“Of course,” Major Travas replied, nonchalant as ever.

The man smirked. “That was a compliment, Major. You could try looking a little happy. That’s all I came to tell you. I don’t know if you’re on vacation or what, but sorry to interrupt your reading. Feel free to contact me if you ever discover the giant dragon of Lake Baszen, the human-faced deep-sea fish in the Arctic Sea, or the snow monsters in the Central Mountain Range. And don’t forget to bring your camera.”

“Of course,” Major Travas replied with another smile.

The man grabbed his newspaper and turned away. Just then, Major Travas suddenly spoke.

“About the self-immolation suicide case 45 days ago with the Dezer Pharmaceuticals executive...”

“Yeah?”

The man stopped in his tracks. Major Travas’s gaze never left the shelves as he continued quietly.

“I just happened to hear that, between 46 and 51 days ago, some of the day labor recruiters in the northern district slums promised an unusually large sum of money to their recruits. All of them happened to recruit older but muscular men of small builds. I’m sure no one would bat an eye at one or two vagrants going missing from the slums. And it’s only recently that their blood trafficking has started to become an issue.”

“...And?”

“Dezer Pharmaceuticals was not floundering, and there was no unusually large life insurance policy on the dead executive. But back in the days when heroin was commonly used as a painkiller, he had been in charge of overseeing the manufacturing process—starting all the way from the acquisition of poppy. Which is why—”

“All right, all right, damn you!” the man burst out, turning, “Fine, I did *not* know that! Looks like you just love saddling us with more work. Bastard.”

With that, the man strode gruffly away.

Major Travas watched the grey suit depart before returning to his book. On the page were the words ‘Footprints of Mysterious Central Mountain Range Snow Creature!’ dancing next to a blurry photograph.

The Sou Be-II embassy was located a slight distance from the civic center. It had been rebuilt on an empty plot of land after the armistice to accommodate more employees.

At the rear intersection of the new five-story concrete embassy building was a black car. Major Travas stepped out of the driver’s seat. It had stopped snowing, but his breaths still rose in puffs into the grey sky.

The major handed his keys to the soldier who greeted him. Then he saluted and went into the building. He took off his hat and coat, and stepped into the elevator to head to the third floor.

It was a plain office setting inside save for the sign labeled ‘Royal Army’ hanging on the wall. Administrative clerks were busy at work under the even spread of fluorescent lights. The sound of shuffling paper and typewriter keys filled the room.

Major Travas walked into a hallway on the side and opened the door to a small room at the very end. It was a snug office with eight desks inside. The only person in the room stood when he entered, surprised.

“Major? Don’t you have the day off today?”

She was a woman in her late twenties, wearing a navy suit with a skirt. She had short brown hair and sharp eyes. The words from her mouth were in Bezelese, the official language of Sou Be-II.

“Hello, Axe. Where is the colonel?” Major Travas asked, also in Bezelese.

The woman named Axe replied tersely, “He had to attend a party last night.”

“Hung over, I see. It may be part of his duties, but I feel for him.”

Major Travas crossed the room to his personal office. He took out a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

“Tea, Major?” Axe asked from outside the wide-open door. Major Travas answered as he hung up his coat and jacket.

“Please. Thank you, Axe. I came in today to look into something. Where are the others?”

“The corner store, sir. To, er...to buy some crisps...” Axe said nervously.

“You mean the crisps I warned you to stay away from because they’re so greasy and have a strong smell and taste?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“They can be a treat once in a while. Could I have some too?”

“Of course, sir! They’ll be back very soon.”

Just as Axe said, the moment Major Travas sat at his neatly-organized desk and received his lukewarm cup of tea—

“The Capital Crisp Retrieval Squad is back in one piece with a big haul! Let’s dig in.”

A group of men came crowding into the office. The bringer of good news was a man in his twenties, who was accompanied by a man in his thirties and two men in their forties. All of them were wearing suits and carrying large paper bags.

When they discovered Major Travas, who should have been on vacation that day, they put down their bags in surprise and embarrassment. And they turned to Axe for answers as she welcomed them back.

“He says he wants to look into something today,” she said, reaching into one of the bags and taking out a crisp. She bit into it and grabbed a bag to take to the major. The man in his thirties let her take it, confused.

The man in his twenties put down his paper bag on a desk.

“You’ve got got no real work to do and a long vacation, Major. You could leave all the paperwork to us and take a breather. Never seen a finer workaholic.”

The others turned to Major Travas in agreement.

“Let us help you.”

They nodded in unison.

* * *

The 12th day of the final month.

“All right. Cheers to a year well done!”

“Cheers!”

Two secondary school students raised a toast with glasses of grape juice.

They were in the kitchen of a typical apartment building in the Capital District. Outside the fifth-story window, it was snowing hard enough to almost block out the building across the street.

The students were sitting across the table from each other. One of them was Lillia Schultz. She had a very long full name—Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz—and was almost 16 years old. She had long, straight brown hair and big brown eyes. If she didn’t say anything, she looked like a demure girl—but at the moment, she was chugging her grape juice.

“Yeah! That hits the spot! Nothing like a glass to wash down the stress of studying!”

She sounded more like a middle-aged man at a bar after work than a teenaged girl. But she was in her school uniform nonetheless—a green checkered skirt, a white blouse, and a red tie, along with a grey jacket.

The other student was Strauski Megmica—also known as Meg. Because she was from Sou Be-Il, ‘Strauski’ was her family name. She had moved to the Capital District two years ago with her family for her father’s work. She became friends with Lillia, who spoke Bezelese, after they took the same class together.

She had beautiful black hair tied into pigtails, and fair skin and dark eyes. At Lillia’s side, she looked even more mature than she already was (Meg had entered secondary school a year late). Just like Lillia, Meg was in her winter uniform. She had taken off her jacket and hung it on the back of her chair, and over her shirt she wore a cream-colored cardigan embroidered with the school emblem.

Meg slowly sipped half her glass and placed it back on the table. “It’s already been a year since we met, Lillia. Time flies,” she remarked.

“It sure does. Here. Have some more,” Lillia replied, and filled Meg’s glass. Then she poured more juice for herself. At school they spoke Roxchean together, but now they were using Bezelese. “It went by so quickly. Next year, we’ll be fourth-years. They’ll start pestering us about university, too. But today’s a day for celebration, so let’s forget the serious stuff.”

It was earlier that very day that the end-of-classes ceremony had taken place. They had gone out for lunch together at a nearby restaurant and were now relaxing at Lillia’s house.

“When did you say you were coming back, Meg?”

“The 13th of next year.”

“So the day before class starts. I’ll pray that your plane doesn’t get delayed.”

“Thank you, Lillia. ...Actually, I’d prefer if you prayed we wouldn’t crash, but I’m scared to just say the word.”

“You’re the one who mentioned it, Meg. You’ve never been on a plane before?” asked Lillia.

Meg nodded nervously.

“Don’t worry! Aeroplanes these days don’t crash.”

“But...what if the engines give out halfway?”

“In midair? There’s nothing to worry about. Even if the engines die, an aeroplane can keep flying for a while. You can even control it! It’s called gliding. And Mom says that engines these days don’t stop like that. So she’s complaining about how they don’t train young pilots to get out of fixes like that anymore.”

Meg went silent, unsure whether Lillia was trying to comfort her or scare her.

“Oh! Sorry, Meg. I’m sorry. Don’t worry about it! Just go to sleep in your seat, and you’ll be there before you know it!”

Meg changed the subject to avoid discussing aeroplanes further. “You said you’re going to Iks this winter, right? I’m jealous. I’d love to go someday.”

“It *is* a nice place. Unlike the city here, there’s mountains in every direction and the snow is beautiful. And if they get a lot of snowfall, you can see fun stuff like avalanches now and then,” Lillia said, not considerate in the least for potential avalanche victims or their families.

She stood and pulled out a book from the shelf by the kitchen. It was a travel guide for the Kingdom of Iks. Lillia took out a map from the pages and spread it on the table.

The Central Mountain Range vertically bisected the only continent on the planet. The Kingdom of Iks was situated on the Roxchean side of that mountain range. In the middle of the country was the long, narrow Lake Ras. And dotted around the massive lake—which measured at 100 meters from north to south and 40 kilometers from east to west—were cities and villages.

The Kingdom of Iks was colored green on the map. And in small letters were written the words, ‘Western border and size of Kingdom of Iks unknown’. Because the heart of the Central Mountain Range—which was over 10,000 meters tall in some places—was inaccessible to humans, it was impossible to draw a precise border.

“Is Iks the only member state in Roxche that’s in the mountains?” asked Meg.

Lillia nodded and gesticulated wildly as she continued to explain.

“Sure is. It’s really amazing. On clear days, you can see mountains everywhere. It’s completely surrounded—and the peaks are really sharp, too. They’re covered in snow even in summer. And in summer, the valleys turn green and when you climb up any of the mountains you can see the big blue lake. And when you look down towards Roxche you can just faintly make out the plains.”

“Wow. Iks is the only kingdom in Roxche, right?”

“Yeah. And it’s ruled by a queen, too. Queen Francesca. She’s really beautiful, and still young. Although I’ve only ever seen a tiny picture of her in the papers.”

“And her husband is the Hero of the Mural. The one who ended the war.”

“Yeah. Something Benedict from Sou Be-Il, right?”

“‘Carr’. He must be from the south. They’re such a perfect couple. It’s amazing.”

“This is the first time I’m spending the new year in Iks. But I heard it’s gonna be a real party on the last day of the year. Everyone has fun all night celebrating the new year and watches the sun rise together,” Lillia said, folding up the map and placing it back in the book.

“Really? It’s similar in Sou Be-Il.” Meg said, surprised.

She explained that the last day of the year was very important in Sou Be-Il. Families would eat together before going to a chapel for evening service. Then people would go out into the streets to loudly count down toward the new year. And on the first day of the new year, the people of Sou Be-Il could visit the palace and see the royal family beyond a glass window.

“Kings and queens, huh. I wonder what kind of lives they have.”

“Who knows? But I’ve heard that the royal family of Bezel is having some problems.”

“Why?”

“The princess is 20 years old now. Normally, a princess her age would have already been married. But...”

“She doesn’t have anyone?”

“No. They say there’s almost no suitable men her age in the royal family of Iltoa, or among the high-ranking aristocrats. I don’t mean to be rude, but since she’s going to rule as queen someday...she needs a husband worthy of her status.”

“So she can’t just bring any guy home and say, ‘This is my boyfriend’.”

“Exactly.”

“She doesn’t have any decent classmates to marry?”

“The princess doesn’t go to school.”

“Huh. The tragedy of the upper classes, I guess. Come to think of it, I think the heir to the throne in Iks is 16 or 17 this year. They’re almost the same age...but then again, the heir to Iks a princess too, and she has to take over after her mother.”

“We can worry about them all we like, but...” Meg began.

“...It’s not like we can help them,” Lillia finished.

Meg’s eyes narrowed. “I think we should be thankful, you know. After all, we can choose the people we like—the people we might end up marrying someday.”

“Yeah,” Lillia said half-heartedly, chugging her grape juice again. Then she froze, as though something occurred to her. “Do you have one?”

“Huh?” Meg replied, her eyes wide. Lillia stared up at her face.

“Strauski Megmica, do you have someone in mind?”

“Huh? Er...what?”

“I’m the one asking questions here.”

“I...I don’t...think so. No,” Meg replied, frozen. Lillia backed down.

“I see. So no.”

“What about you, Lillia?”

“Huh? N-no!”

“I...I see.”

“Yeah. ...Let’s not talk about this.”

“Yeah. All this talk about marriage is still so far away.”

Almost in unison, they sighed. Lillia reached for the juice bottle when Meg spoke again.

“I think it might be okay to take our time.”

“That’s right! We’re not at the ‘have to get married now’ age yet—we’re not even pushing it,” Lillia replied, shaking the bottle.

“Then you know what we do? We drink one more glass!”

“Yes! That’s the spirit! Cheers!”

Just as they finished raising a toast,

“I’m home!”

The owner of the house returned.

“Oh, Mom! You’re early today,” Lillia said, surprised, “Welcome home.”

“Thank you. Oh! Hello, Meg.”

Stepping into the kitchen was a woman so beautiful and youthful that she did not look like she was in her mid-thirties. She had eyes as blue as the sky on a clear day, and long, shimmering blond hair tied up in a bun. She wore a dark red uniform, complete with a jacket with a badge of rank, a pilot’s badge, and a name tag, and a long skirt. It was Allison Whittington Schultz, Lillia’s mother and a captain and test pilot in the Confederation Air Force.

“I am here to visit your home. It has been a long time, Allison,” Meg said in Roxchean, getting to her feet. Meg and Lillia’s other friends called Allison by given name instead of calling her ‘Ms. Schultz’.

“Meg says her family’s going back home for the first time in two years the day after tomorrow.”



“That sounds wonderful.”

“Yeah. Anyway, you’re home early, Mom. What’s going on?” Lillia asked, still seated. Allison put down a packed file in the living room.

“The end-of-term ceremony at the Air Force Academy was today. Just like at your school. And an old superior of mine came to say hi. It’s been so long since we met I decided to take half the day off to go to the get-together. I’ll be out real soon.”

“I see. Oh, we’re out of tea, Mom. I was panicking for a second today.”

“Sorry, honey. Wasn’t there any juice left in the storage room?”

“We are drinking them now,” Meg replied.

“You want some too, Mom?”

“No thank you. I’ll be going now. I’m coming home late, so make sure to lock up before you go to bed.”

“Okay. Have fun.”

Allison walked into the kitchen and planted a kiss on Lillia’s cheek. Then she winked at Meg and walked out the hallway. The door opened, then shut.

Lillia looked back at Meg, across the table.

“Ohh!” Meg’s eyes were shut tight, and her hands were balled into trembling fists.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lillia.

“Ohh! Lillia’s mother is still as ever cool! She is magnificent!” Meg raved in Roxchean. Lillia was unconvinced.

“You think so?”

“Yes, I do think so! You don’t know because you see Allison every day.”

“Well...I *do* see her a lot with messy hair, looking for her bra when it’s on her head...”

“Oh my. I think Allison is not a morning woman.”

“Hm? Oh, a morning person, you mean?”

“Yes, those words. They are my new Roxchean vocabulary today.”

Then, Meg switched to Bezelese.

“Lillia, since your mother’s a soldier, does she teach you how to fight and stuff?”

“Hmm...I’d stake an omelet and a bottle of milk from the cafeteria that you don’t know any real soldiers.”

“You’re good, Lillia.”

“How to fight, huh? ...She did teach me one thing.”

“What is it? Can girls pull it off, too?”

“Let’s see...when you’re fighting hand-to-hand and you need to put some extra oomph into an attack...”

“Yes?”

“Say your name before the technique for maximum power!”

Meg said nothing.

“That’s what Mom told me!”

“...Hah. Meg Punch.”

Meg tapped Lillia’s shoulder with a fist.

“Counter. Lillia Chop.”

Very slowly, Lillia slammed her left hand under Meg’s shoulder.

"I don't know if this is working."

"No. Would you still trust my mother?"

Meg could not respond.

"What do you say?"

"I think she's got a wonderful figure! What's her secret? Is it a really strict diet?"

"I don't know how to say this, but... Well, Mom's a meat-eater. She might as well be a carnivore. Although she almost never drinks 'cause she says it's not good for when you go up to really high altitudes. But she does 100 sit-ups for her abs every morning right before she showers to get that sculpted stomach. Does that help?"

"Thank you for destroying my hopes and dreams. Waahh..." Meg complained, feigning sobs.

"Weep not, Milady. Life and suffering are one and the same; you must overcome this pain'."

"...Where did you get that line?"

"It's what the main character in 'What is Your Name?' says to the love interest at the end. Y'know, the radio drama from the Capital District station."

"Oh, I remember! It's a really popular drama, isn't it?"

"I hear the sequel's starting in the beginning of the new year."

"Oh no! I'll miss the first broadcast!" Meg exclaimed. Lillia put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Weep not, Milady. Life and suffering are one and the same; you must overcome this pain."

* * *

The 26th day of the final month.

"Highness? Your Highness? Has anyone seen Prince Treize? Has he left for Kunst already?"

"No, he went to the mountains at the crack of dawn. He was raring to take care of the wandering wolf that's been bothering us all week."

"I see. All alone?"

"Yes. I'm sure he'll be back for afternoon tea, whether he nabs the wolf or not."

"Hmm... With his skills, I'm sure His Highness will be successful in his hunt."

"Then I wager a hundred Roxes than he ends up losing the beast."

"I as well."

"Hm. I don't think this wager will work out."

"You're right."

"Achoo!"

In the snowy valley, Treize stifled a sneeze.

He was 16 years old with an androgynous face that mirrored his mother's, and a lean and muscular build like his father. Treize was not unattractive, but he was currently dressed like a snowman.

He was wearing a shirt and pants made of thick knitted wool, over which were a sweater and a winter coat, over which were a white parka and snow pants. A pair of black goggles glinted over his eyes and a white cloth was wrapped around the rest of his face.

The wool hat on his head had ear flaps tied together under the chin, and the corner of a white sheet was tied over his hat. His boots and his gloves were also white.

Treize was at the base of a large, rolling valley blanketed in snow, a world of nothing but white. Large coniferous trees dotted the landscape, and in the middle was a 30-meter-wide plain. A small stream flowed down the very center. The end of the valley connected to a steep incline and disappeared into the cloudy sky. The back of the valley led to a gentle downward slope, veiled by the fog. There were no manmade objects like houses or utility poles in sight.

Treize leaned on his left side against a boulder topped with snow and sat with his legs stretched before him.

In his hands he held a long, thin rifle with a wooden stock. It was a bolt-action rifle that had to be reloaded after each shot, equipped with a short scope. Loaded inside were five rounds measuring at 7.62mm wide and 54mm long.

Behind him was a backpack—also white—and a pair of snowshoes woven from bent branches.

“Phew...”

Though his eyes were concealed beneath his goggles, Treize kept his gaze trained ahead into the valley, slowly exhaling.

On a rolling slope about 5 meters from him was a plump, round chicken shivering in the snow, curling into its own wings. Tied to its leg was a string, which was tied to a nearby rock.

Treize was almost completely still as he shivered in the freezing air and stared ahead. Gusts of wind sometimes cut past the valley.

“It’s here...”

Slowly, carefully, Treize raised his rifle. He placed the stock against his cheek, his left elbow against the inside of his left knee, and his right elbow against the inside of his right knee as he peered into the scope.

In the crosshairs stood the shivering chicken, blown up to 3.5 times its size through the lens. When Treize raised the rifle slightly, he saw the approaching beast.

It was a mountain wolf common to the Central Mountain Range. The creature was a light grey in color, almost completely white and about as big as mid-sized dogs raised by rich families. But its maw and the teeth that glimmered in its mouth were sharper than those of any pet dog. The wolf halted at times before nearing, step by step.

Wolves were pack animals by nature, but there was only one here now. It must have been cast out of the pack or separated—a literal lone wolf. There was a nice ring to the phrase, but real lone wolves had difficulty procuring food and often went hungry. And out of desperation, such wolves would come down to human settlements—which a pack would normally avoid—and hunt livestock.

Unsurprisingly, the wolf that drew near was emaciated. Its skin was taut around its ribcage.

“Looks like you’re having a tough time, too,” Treize whispered, “But that chicken is ours. I’m going to roast it whole once Lillia arrives. I can’t let you take it—you’re not getting anything.”

For a moment, he took his eye off the scope. Treize checked the mechanism to see the rifle was properly loaded. He had not armed the safety to begin with. He wiggled his gloved right hand and his index finger stuck out of the glove. The second glove he was wearing underneath was also white.

The wolf stopped about 20 meters from the chicken and cautiously scanned the area. For a split second, its eyes met Treize’s through the scope.

“Just one shot is all I need...”

The wolf leapt. It charged straight for its prey. The chicken noticed the approach and spread its wings in an attempt to flee, but the string around its leg quickly went taut and it fell face-first to the ground. The chicken flailed as it stirred up snow. The wolf slowed, convinced of its victory, and stalked closer.

“Sorry.”

Soon, the wolf’s entire body fit into the center of the scope. Treize held his breath and slowly put pressure on his trigger finger.

Then, he pulled. The spring-loaded firing pin inside the bolt sprang forward and hit the detonator at the center of the bottom of the round, which was inside the firing chamber at the back of the barrel. A small spark erupted, lighting the dormant detonator inside the cartridge and forcing it to instantly combust. The sudden expansion of gas forced the ammunition clear out of the barrel.

The bullet spun furiously along the grooves in the barrel, and escaped the muzzle with an explosive burst of noise and gas—traveling at over 800 meters per second, and 2,800 kilometers an hour.

In less than a tenth of a second, the 20-gram bullet would pierce the wolf’s forehead, breaking through skin and skull with pressure alone, scattering its brain across the snow. At least, that was Treize’s intention.

He was not far enough to miss. But just as Treize willed his trigger finger to move, the wolf tripped on a rock and fell forward. The bullet flew over its head, hit a boulder, and flew off with a spark.

The recoil instantly forced the world through the scope upwards.

“What?!”

By the time Treize pulled the rifle back down, he saw the wolf—having quickly regained footing—lunge at the chicken. Its grey jaws tore apart the chicken’s skinny neck.

“Damn it!”

Taking his right hand off the grip, Treize raised the bolt lever to undo the lock. Then he pulled down the lever and loaded the next round from the magazine, and pushed the lever forward to lock it again.

There was no hesitation in his movements, and it all took place in less than a second. But in that short time the wolf had already turned.

The scope followed the wolf. It fled as fast as it could, deeper into the valley. With the chicken in its mouth the wolf's paws drummed against the snow. The string had already snapped.

"Damn it...that's Lillia's chicken."

Treize took aim and pulled the trigger. Snow scattered upward just next to the galloping wolf.

Treize operated the lever again and took aim, but the wolf grew smaller in his sights by the second. The third round missed, to the upper left. He loaded again and opened fire. He aimed the fourth round just a little ahead of the wolf, but it narrowly missed its target.

"C'mon, just hit the thing!"

His agitated fifth shot flew off wildly in a spray of snow.

Treize pulled back the bolt again. But—

He did not push it back. When he glanced at the rifle, he could tell instantly that he was out of ammo. A faint wisp of smoke rose from the gun, accompanied by the stinging smell of gunpowder.

"Aw, man."

Treize looked up. The grey beast was moving deeper into the valley. He could still recognize its shape, but even that grew smaller and smaller.

"You win," he mumbled. He was not wearing his earmuffs because he had intended to finish with one shot; his ears were ringing.

Eventually, the wolf became a speck in the distance and disappeared into the valley.

"I lose..."

Sitting on the ground, Treize slowly reached over to the backpack behind him.

He took out a small wooden box from one of the pockets and opened the lid. It was neatly packed with extra rounds.

Treize began to load them into the magazine one by one for protection on his way back. He inserted one, then took out another from the box and put it into the magazine. And once five rounds were loaded, he pushed the bolt forward. This time, he armed the safety.

Leaning the rifle against the boulder, Treize searched for his spent shell casings. Brass casings could be reused several times if they were loaded with gunpowder and a bullet.

Treize picked up all the shell casings melting through the snow and stuffed them into his pockets.

"Guess I should get going soon."

He tied his snowshoes to his boots and slung his backpack on his back. Then, he took out a leather strap from his pocket and fixed it to the rifle, before slinging it over his right shoulder.

Suddenly, Treize stopped. He put down his rifle and backpack and took off his parka, coat, and sweater. He rolled them up in a ball, stuffed them into his backpack, then put on his jacket and prepared to leave again.

"Looks like I'll have to think of something else for dinner."

He began to stride down the snowy valley.

* * *

"What sort of a person is Treize, you ask? I would have to say, in a word..."

“In a word...?”

“An imbecile. He is an imbecile, Elder Sister.”

“A-an ‘imbecile’...?”

“Although it pains me as his older sister to say so, yes.”

“Oh? I was informed that you were the younger twin, Meriel.”

“I’m afraid that is untrue, Elder Sister. Treize goes on about being the older brother—Father also agrees with him, yes, but it has been long known that the second twin to be born is always considered the elder.”

“Is...is that so? My sincerest apologies, Meriel. I don’t know much about your customs...”

“Please don’t let it bother you, Elder Sister. None of that should concern you! I simply wished to inform you that Treize is the younger twin.”

“I see. I will remember that well. So, er...speaking of Treize...”

“Although it pains me as his older sister to say this, to be frank, Treize can be quite emotionally frail. To be specific...let’s see...hmm... I must admit that he is very handsome, being the very image of our mother.”

“Yes, I’ve seen a photograph of him. He looks just like Her Majesty.”

“But he is emotionally frail. When we were children, he was always hiding behind Mother. Even when we quarreled, one volley of arguments sent him running to Mother or a grandmother in the valley.”

“Oh my. That sounds adorable.”

“But now, he is nothing but impudent. And because he is a man, I can no longer beat him in a battle of strength.”

“But surely he’s not so barbaric as to try and solve everything with force?”

“No, I suppose not. But they say that old habits die hard—Treize still fails to be decisive at the opportune moments. And I doubt he will change. ...Elder Sister, are you interested in my brother?”

“Oh! Actually, yes. You know that I do not have a single friend my own age. I was always very lonely, to tell the truth. But now that I’ve become friends with you, Meriel, I think I would like to get to know Treize as well.”

“I understand! I will bring him with me next time, even if I must drag him on a leash!”

“Thank you, Meriel. I would love to visit Iks myself, if not for my circumstances.”

“I’m certain Treize will understand. I’ll bring him along next time, I promise!”

“Thank you, Meriel. I’m looking forward to it already. ...Truly.”

* * *

The 27th day of the final month.

A group of people were wrestling a mountain of paperwork in the Sou Be-II Embassy at the Capital District.

Major Travas, Axe, and the four men working for the former. They were in the midst of exhausting work, quietly checking each and every word in the stacks of documents piled on their desks.

The man in his thirties finished one stack and sighed loudly.

“Clear. Nothing fishy with this bank.”

He tossed the documents into a cardboard box at his feet.

“Good work. Everyone, take a breather and have some tea. Feel free to get some air if you’d like,” Major Travas said as he continued to scan through a document, again dressed in a suit instead of his uniform. His subordinates could see him through his open office door. The men exchanged glances and shrugged, knowing they couldn’t rest now.

“Hm...?” Axe, whose eyes were also focused on a document, frowned. “Major, may I have a moment?”

She stood from her seat and went to Travas with the document in hand. The men stopped and turned their attention to her.

“I’ve found something unusual. Someone’s been making irregular purchases of the same products for the past year through an anonymous account at this bank.”

“Not weapons?”

Axe shook her head and held out the document. Travas received it and scanned the many words on the paper. And 10 seconds later, he furrowed his brow.

“Film stock?”

“Yes. 35mm color stock from Baker & Don. It’s the latest version in Roxche. And as you can see, it’s a rather expensive brand of film.”

“Mass quantities...and all film stock.”

“I’ve yet to find any other transactions with unusual commonalities. This might be the work of a corporation or a powerful millionaire, or perhaps a drug dealer’s attempts at money laundering.”

“If the buyer is always the same person or organization, perhaps. ...Why does our anonymous buyer here want to buy film stock in secret, I wonder?” Major Travas asked.

“Strange, isn’t it? Unlike weapons or ammunition, no one would be suspicious about buying film stock in bulk,” Axe noted.

“A film crew. Hmm...this might be worth looking into. Everyone, I’d like your attention.”

“W-would you have us launch an investigation, Major?” asked Axe. Major Travas shook his head.

“No. We’ll be getting help from the police.”

He reached for the phone on his desk and picked up the receiver.

Axe’s gaze turned chilly. “*Him*, Major? I don’t approve, sir.”

“He may hate us Westerners, but he is passionate about his duties as a police officer,” Major Travas replied.

Axe shot back, “I’ve never seen him in anything but the same grey suit. Please ask him to change sometimes, sir.”

As Major Travas began his phone call, the men left the office.

“That’s the major for you. Wanna go get lunch?”

“That sounds good. ...Y’know, where’s the major supposed to be from, anyway? There’s a fine line between taking on a job because you’re bored and taking an active part in fighting crime for a different country.”

“As if we didn’t know that already. And it’s not a bad idea to put Roxche in a bit of debt to us.”

“I guess you’re right. But you know, when I work with the major, I sometimes think...”

“Hm?”

“...It’s like he’s not just working for Sou Be-Il. Almost like he’s working for Roxche, too.”

“Working for the whole world, eh? Not bad. It’s just like him.”

“Is this really all right? Not for the major, I mean. For us.”

“It’s fine. We’ve been ordered to follow him, so that’s what we do. If we’re ordered to kill him, that’s what we do. And have we been ordered to kill him?”

“No.”

“Exactly.”

Chapter 2: Everyone Heads to Iks

The 28th day of the final month.

“Why not fly there yourself, Captain?” joked the subordinate who drove Allison and Lillia to the airport near the Capital District, which also doubled as a Confederation Air Force base.

With that, mother and daughter were off.

Soaring through the air was a civilian aeroplane about 20 meters long with a wingspan of 30 meters. There were three engines and propellers on the plane, one on the nose and one on each of the wings. The reinforced and rippled outer panels drew lines along the fuselage and the wings at regular intervals. The landing gear was fixed, and large tires were attached under the engines.

The civilian aeroplane traveled at a crawl, but it was lauded for its comfort and was mass-produced, now widely used in Roxche. This model was also famous for popularizing air travel, which had once been a luxury reserved for the highest echelons of society. On the shiny grey fuselage were the words ‘Confederation Airlines’ and a three-digit production code.

The sky that winter morning was a perfectly clear blue. The plains of Roxche were dotted endlessly by clouds. Villages, roads, rivers, and canals drew tiny maps on the ground over a kilometer below.

There was an aisle going down the middle of the passenger cabin; flanking it were eight rows of seats, with one seat on either side of the aisle. The captain’s right shoulder and the first officer’s left shoulder were visible through the cockpit door at the front of the cabin. The interior of the framework and the paneling was painted a light green.

The seats were full. As the cabin shook with the engines’ roar, most passengers pressed their faces to the windows and watched the world pass by.

And in the right-side seat at the very back,

Allison sat fast asleep. She wore thick brown winter pants and a reddish-brown sweater. A blanket from the plane was over her lap.

In the seat across the aisle,

Lillia sat fast asleep. She was also wearing long pants like Allison, and had a dark green half-coat over her shoulders.

The suit-clad middle-aged man in front of her glanced back, frowned disapprovingly when he saw she was wasting her chance to enjoy the uncommon view, and turned back to his window.

Due to limitations on the craft’s cruising range, the aeroplane had to make landing at least once every four hours. Each time, the passengers would disembark to eat or get some rest. The plane would be refueled and checked in the meantime before departing again. Passengers headed in a different direction could transfer planes during this time.

On the evening of the 28th, after one landing and another four-hour flight, Allison and Lillia arrived at a village near the very center of Roxche. That was the end of their trip that day. They would need to fly for another whole day to reach Iks.

Thanks to technological developments, aeroplanes could fly through bad weather or the night with the help of instruments. But only larger cities supported night planes—and even if night planes were available, many people chose rather to spend the nights at hotels for a break from the exhaustion of traveling.

Allison and Lillia also headed to a hotel, which they had booked alongside their plane tickets. They had dinner, showered, and lay down in their beds in their pajamas.

“First day’s travels, complete!”

“Complete! We have an early flight tomorrow, so make sure to get up early, sweetheart.”

“I’m more worried about you, Mom.”

“It’s going to be all right. I can get up early when I have to. Good night.”

* * *

That evening.

Two men were talking over the telephone. One was in the Roxche police headquarters, and the other was in the Sou Be-Il embassy.

<Yes, this is Major Travas.>

<Good evening to you, foreign aristocrat. Thanks for butting in and helping out with our country’s crime-fighting. Things all right with you?>

<Yes. It’s been quite warm these past few days, don’t you agree?>

<At least *try* to play along with the sarcasm, my man. Or do you not even return fire if you get shot at? Don’t tell me you’re actually pacifists. The Dezer executive who just came back from the dead had a better sense of humor than you.>

<My apologies. And I am glad to hear that the executive is well.>

<Hmph. I’ll be taking all the credit for cleaning out the cartel, for your information. Now, let me get to the point about our loaded film buyer. I nabbed your so-called culprit.>

<...>

<Surprised?>

<That was quick.>

<What’d you expect? ...Is what I’d like to say, but their self-proclaimed bookkeeper rattled them out the moment we started the investigation. They covered up their tracks so well I thought we’d be in for a headache, but then he went and confessed.>

<Oh? ...What sort of people were they?>

<What else? Filmmakers. Not one of those big weekend shows they advertise in the Capital District. Some documentary about loads of beautiful scenery.>

<I see. So why the secrecy?>

<You have no idea how much I enjoy imagining the ignorant look on your face, Major. Apparently they just wanted to keep the production a secret.>

<Pardon?>

<That’s what he told me. They don’t want anyone to know they’re shooting a documentary, and they covered their tracks because the Capital District is the only place they can buy the film stock.>

<And you believe him?>

<I'm just repeating what he said. I dug up info on the crew and the production team, but there weren't any unusual records. They're just normal people.>

<What sort of people are they?>

<I can't get into that much detail. Gotta protect the privacy of innocent Roxchean nationals.>

<Apologies.>

<Anyway, the bookkeeper agreed to the questioning and apologized about his crimes. He's posted bail, so he'll be out by tomorrow evening. And he'll be paying the bank a fine. It's all cleared up now. On the surface, anyway.>

<...>

<You listening?>

<Yes.>

<Cheer up, Major. You just uncovered a *very significant* crime. Should I send the thank-you letter to the embassy with all the trimmings, then?>

<No thank you. I'd appreciate it more if you taped it upside-down to the women's restroom wall at the police headquarters.>

<Heh. Not too shabby. Maybe we *should* go for drinks sometime.>

<I'm afraid I'll have to decline. In any case, what was the crew shooting, and where?>

<Scenery. Don't make me repeat myself.>

<Specifically?>

<Didn't get *that* much into detail. What's it to you?>

<A film crew— ...Never mind. Excuse me. I'm sorry you had to go to so much trouble for such an insignificant case.>

<You should be. Feel free to give me a call next time you want to play more games like this.>

Major Travas put down the receiver. Axe, who had been listening to the conversation with the other men around the desk, finished the major's sentence.

"A film crew is the perfect cover for conducting espionage in broad daylight'."

"Full points," Major Travas said and turned to the others. "Anyone interested in tailing a man tomorrow? Drinks at a bar, making new friends?"

Hands shot into the air.

* * *

The 29th day of the final month.

"Get up, Mom! We're gonna be late! We'll miss our flight!"

"It's okay...they have washing machines on the island..."

"What the heck are you dreaming about? ...Oh no! We're running out of time, Mom! Wake up!"

Lillia was barely out of bed before she was panicking over her mother.

Narrowly boarding the morning flight, Allison and Lillia cruised on the same craft as the previous day as they continued their leisurely journey across the sky.

The aeroplane's final destination was the city of Elitèsa in the Republic of Raputoa, which was adjacent to the Kingdom of Iks. There were no regular flights to Iks—the Schultz family would have to switch to a bus at Elitèsa instead.

The aeroplane refueled in the afternoon and took off towards Elitèsa. Six passengers were onboard, with Allison and Lillia in the front row. Two rows behind them was a businessman in his thirties, and in the back were three men between their forties and fifties, dressed in suits.

The aeroplane flew under a thick layer of clouds. At times, the fuselage shook.

Lillia was once again asleep. She had no interest in the scenery outside. Allison was reading a magazine featuring articles on politics and society, and brief reviews of films and plays.

Time passed, and Allison was in the midst of turning the page on an article on the new North Sea-style grill house that had opened in the Capital District.

“Hm?”

Something seemed to sputter amidst the roar of the engines. Allison looked up past her sleeping daughter and at the left engine and propeller. They were working. She turned to her right.

“Oh dear.”

A thin wisp of black smoke was rising from the engine affixed to the wing outside. It sputtered desperately several more times, then finally stopped with a loud noise. The propeller spun idly several times before stopping as well. The aeroplane tilted slightly to the right.

“I'd better check out this place next time,” Allison noted nonchalantly, folding a corner of the page and placing the magazine at her feet.

“GAH!” The businessman in his thirties cried out. “Hey! The engine's stopped!”

His voice was loud enough to drown out the remaining engine. Lillia opened her eyes. The men in the back exchanged worried glances.

“What's going on, Mom?” asked Lillia.

Allison seemed unconcerned. “The right engine's gone. But since it's not flaming and there's no fuel leakage, the other engine'll keep us going.”

“Oh. All right,” Lillia replied nonchalantly.

“She's tilting! We're done for—this plane's going to crash!” the panicked businessman cried again. Allison turned anxiously, wondering how she should stop him.

“W-we have parachutes!” cried another man, who darted out of the cockpit. He was in his early twenties, and was in a black uniform.

“G-get back here, you imbecile!” the captain, a man in his thirties, hollered from the cockpit with a glance at the cabin. The hysterical first officer rushed down the aisle and toward the back of the cabin, where the exit was.

“Someone stop him!” “Stop that idiot!” the captain and Allison cried at the same time. The three men in the back reacted instantly. In unison they jumped on the first officer, and in the blink of an eye had grabbed him by the limbs and pressed him into an empty seat. When the first officer continued to struggle, one of the men drove his fist into his solar plexus.

“Agh...”

The first officer quickly lost consciousness.

“What’s going on? Are we going to crash?” the businessman asked anxiously.

“No. Don’t worry,” Allison replied calmly, and cast a glance at the three men in the back. With firm nods they silently took charge of the first officer. At that moment, the plane returned to level position. Allison stumbled and grabbed onto the seats because of the sudden movement. Lillia looked up at her.

“What are you going to do, Mom?”

“I’ll be right back.”

With that, Allison entered the cockpit. She sat herself in the first officer’s empty seat and greeted the captain to her right. He looked quite desperate, both hands tight on the yoke. It was clear he was at the end of his rope.

“The greenhorn back there’s a bit of a wreck, isn’t he? Is there anything I can help you with?” Allison asked gently, pointedly keeping her hands away from the controls.

“O-oh...you *do* have some flying experience, ma’am?”

“I’m an Air Force captain. A test pilot. Though I can’t tell you how many hours I’ve logged—we never used to do that back in the day,” Allison replied nonchalantly. The captain instantly deferred.

“Please pardon me, Captain. We’re got a problem—we lost the right engine.”

“I noticed. Of all the things to happen. Although it wasn’t all that uncommon in the old days.”

“There’s a flat plain under us right now. I was considering making an emergency landing.”

“That won’t be necessary. There’s no fuel leak, so we can fly all the way to the runway at Elitèsa.”

“I-I’m afraid I’ve never had to deal with something like this before.”

“But you *did* receive gliding training, no?”

“Y-yes. But only once, and under a veteran instructor’s supervision.”

“Then I’ll supervise for you this time,” Allison said, taking out the flight map from next to the seat. Recorded on it was the topography, the altitude of the airport, the flight path, and the estimated landing and takeoff times. Allison checked her watch and glanced outside.

“We’re not far from Elitèsa Airport.”

“R-really?”

“Let’s prepare for landing.”

“In *this* situation, ma’am?”

“I suppose I could take over, but would it be all right if I took the cost of my daughter’s ticket and mine out of your pay?” Allison joked.

The captain was silent for about 20 seconds, eyes locked ahead, before he finally burst out,

“Please, just help me!”

About an hour before sunset, the aeroplane made landing on time at the airport just outside of Elitèsa with one propeller out of commission.

The airport at Elitèsa had one concrete runway and one passenger lounge—reminiscent of a train station—and two hangars and fuel tanks. It was relatively large for a city in the countryside. There were other aeroplanes there, big and small. Under the distant cloudy sky was the city of Elitèsa, and beyond were the slopes of the Central Mountain Range.

Passengers disembarked from the plane, which had landed on a parking ramp cleared of snow. The three men in the back were calm in their trench coats, and the businessman seemed somewhat unnerved as he stepped out with his coat on his arm.

And—

“We’re finally here.”

Lillia closed her coat as she stretched, disembarking from the aeroplane. Allison did not emerge. Instead, airline employees rushed into the cabin. Several minutes passed before she came outside, saluted by the captain.

Allison and Lillia picked up their luggage in the passenger lounge. They each carried a leather suitcase.

And just as they reached the doors—

“Excuse us, Captain.”

Someone spoke to them. The three men who had quickly subdued the first officer. In front of them were two carts laden with four large, black boxes. The oldest of the men, who had a stern and wrinkled face, said, “You saved our lives. We are in your debt.”

“Not at all,” Allison replied. Lillia proudly raised her head high.

“Your mother is incredible, young lady.”

“Thank you. ... You have a lot of luggage on you, I see.”

The men exchanged glances.

“Filming equipment,” the oldest man replied, putting on a smile ill-fitted to his face.

“You’re shooting something?” asked Lillia.

“Yes. We’re documenting the beauty of the Kingdom of Iks throughout its four seasons. Things happened, and before we knew it we had a year’s worth of footage on our hands.”

“That’s amazing! Do you have cameras and rolls of film in there, then?”

“That’s correct. We’re going to be shooting the last day of the year this time.”

“Is it just you three, then?”

“The rest of the crew rented an aeroplane and got to Iks ahead of us. We’re the last team. It would have been a disaster if the plane made an emergency landing and delayed us. We’re very grateful.”

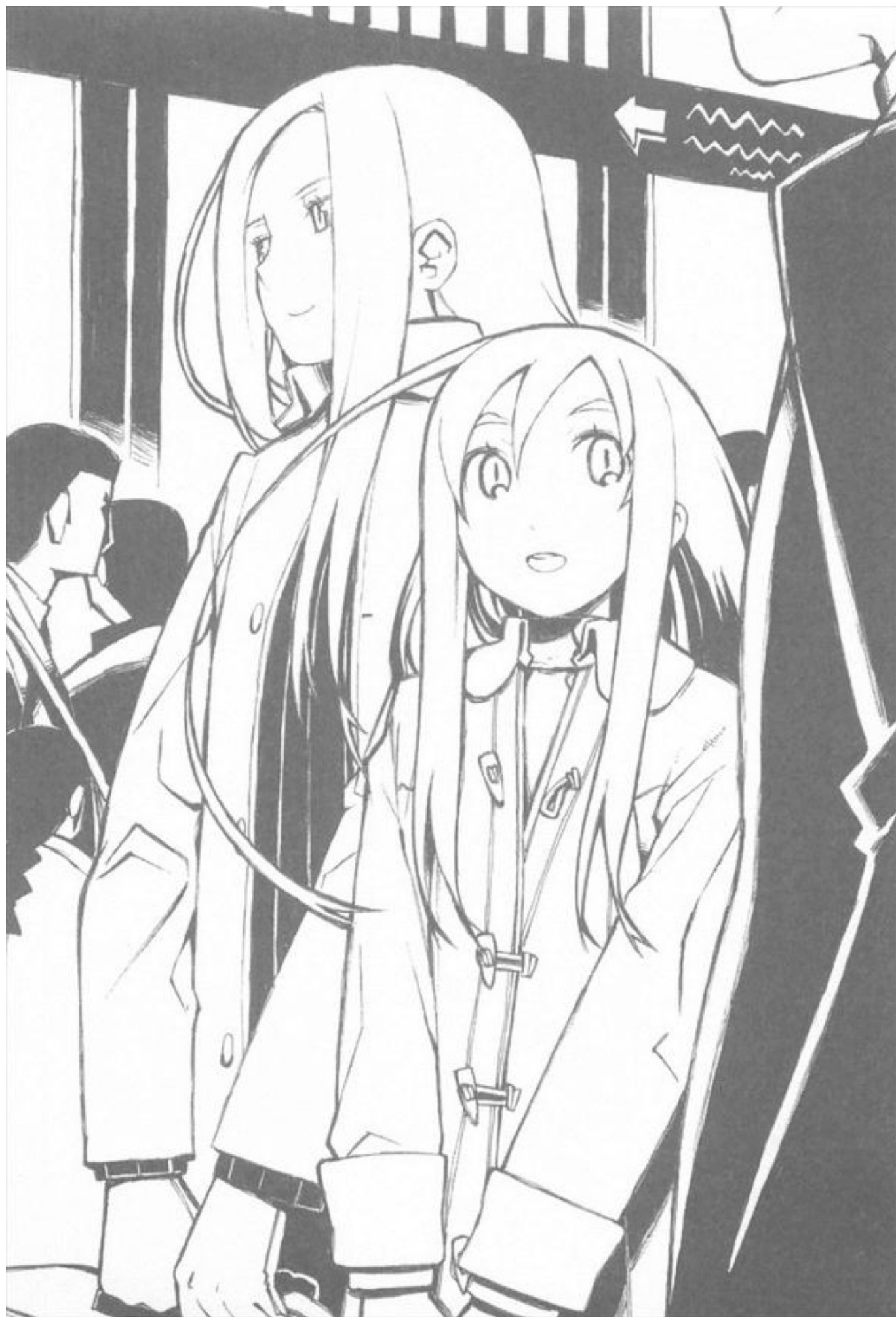
“We’re going to Iks, too. By bus tonight. We’ll arrive early tomorrow morning.”

“Our team’s heading off now. We rented a truck ahead of time.”

“I hope we see one another there, then.” Lillia smiled. The man smiled back.

“Yes. I hope so.”

The three men and the two women waved one another goodbye.



Allison and Lillia took a taxi into downtown Elitèsa.

After a relaxing dinner at a restaurant downtown, they had tea and waited for their bus. And at around 11 in the evening, they boarded the bus bound for Kunst, the capital of the Kingdom of Iks. The bus was large, was equipped with a bathroom, and was filled with tourists and homebound locals.

Allison and Lillia sat side-by-side just behind the driver's seat. The bus began to move in the darkness.

Lillia shut the curtains on the window.

"Once we go to sleep and wake up, it'll be morning and we'll be there. Right?"

"Sure. What else could possibly happen? Treize'll be waiting for us tomorrow."

"Heh...heh heh. I'm gonna make him pay us back for freeloading this summer. Good night, Mom."

"Good night, sweetheart."

The bus drove out of the city and down the street that crossed the snowy plains. At first to the south, then to the west, it continued with its load of sleeping passengers. There was a long road head, up the harrowing mountains to Iks and past the southern pass into Kunst.

And finally, on the 30th day of the final month. The last day of the year.

"Mmh..."

When Lillia opened her eyes to the light shining through the front windshield, the bus was not moving.

"Are we here?"

Lightly rubbing her eyes, Lillia peered out between the curtains. And as her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw—

"What?"

Not the bustling bus stop in Kunst, but lines of vehicles stuck on the snowy mountain road. They were still on the mountainside. To the right of the road was an upward ascent, and beyond the guardrails to the left was a snowy—but not too steep—downward slope.

There was another bus in front of Lillia's. Behind them were trucks, then cars, lined as far as Lillia could see until the curve. The many headlights on the road made it seem as bright as dawn.

The clock by the driver's seat pointed to 3 in the morning. They had not been traveling long. When the driver noticed Lillia was awake, he whispered to her, "It's an avalanche, missy. The road's jammed solid about 50 meters ahead."

"Again? Why?" Lillia groaned, wondering why everything was happening to her. But the driver assumed she was in disbelief about the avalanche.

"Who knows? We don't normally get avalanches in this area, especially at this time of year."

"Really?"

"We have no idea when they'll send over a bulldozer from Kunst, so everyone's working together to clear the snow ahead. It'll be a while yet, so get some sleep."

It was only then that Lillia realized that the seat next to hers was empty. She looked around in confusion when the driver gave her her answer.

“Your sister’s out there helping out—said she was a soldier or something.”

“Heh. As if I’m gonna let her show me up.”

Lillia disembarked and put on her hat and gloves. She grabbed a shovel from the bus and approached the people surrounding the mound of snow. They looked almost like ants crawling around piles of spilled sugar. Lillia found Allison in their midst.

Allison’s feet were covered in snow, and she was sweating slightly; she looked up in surprise when she spotted Lillia.

“Oh? You should get some more sleep, sweetheart.”

“I got plenty of rest on the aeroplane today. And it’s uncomfortable in more ways than one, trying to sleep in the bus.”

“We still have a long way to go, Lillia.”

“Not if I can help it. Let’s get this over with,” Lillia said energetically.

But there was simply too much snow. Eventually dawn came and the sun rose through the clouds, but less than a quarter of the pile had been cleared.

It was around when everyone had reached their limit that a truck carrying a bulldozer arrived. It cleared away the snow far more efficiently than human hands.

The people watched as the road was cleared in half an hour, and realized that their efforts would only get them to town 10 minutes faster than if they had stayed in their vehicles. Countless sleepy eyes glared resentfully at the bulldozer.

It was 11 in the morning.

The road was blanketed in white. The slanted roofs designed for snow to slide off were blue. Winter in Kunst consisted of only two colors.

The capital of Iks, a city of ninety thousand, was situated on the southwestern tip of Lake Ras. It was bustling in preparation for the new year’s celebrations. Tin lanterns hung from homes and streets, their thick candles waiting inside for sundown. Street vendors were beginning to set up shop; horse-drawn carriages, not yet ousted by motor vehicles, trotted and clunked down the snow-cleared streets.

The streets had been set in zigzag formations to hinder hostile invasions. But in the midst of them was one very large street that ran straight from the south to the city center. At a major intersection at the end of that street was a bus stop.

Treize was waiting there. He sat on a bench under an awning and stared blankly into the sky, leaning back.

He was dressed in a pair of green winter pants and a jacket, along with a hat—perfectly normal attire for a local. It was below freezing that day, but natives of Iks were used to it enough that it felt warm.

It had been five hours since the scheduled arrival time, but the intersection was empty. Not a single night bus from Elitèsa had arrived. The glimpses of blue in the sky had been covered completely after dawn by a thick layer of clouds from the south. The wind was beginning to pick up.

“It looks like there’s going to be a big snowfall. We’re in for some bad weather today,” Treize mumbled to himself.

Countless people were passing by. Not a single person in the kingdom, where only the ruling monarch was revealed to the public, recognized the unofficial prince.

Suddenly, he heard a low roar in the distance. The noise grew louder and louder, until an aeroplane eventually appeared in the east. It was a mid-sized model with two engines.

“More rich folks.”

Because the Kingdom of Iks was a famous tourist destination, visitors from all over Roxche—and sometimes Sou Be-Il—came to enjoy its lakes and mountains. There were no other mountain regions to speak of in Roxche, so the people of Iks were proud of their homeland’s views of the majestic Central Mountain Range and Lake Ras. However, the country forbade entry to the dangerous hinterlands near the heart of the Central Mountain Range.

Tourists—especially the wealthy ones—tended to avoid the long drive to Iks up the mountain pass, and instead rented the newest aeroplanes for travel.

In the summer, they used mostly seaplanes or amphibious planes, which led to countless temporary piers being set up on the lake along lines of boats. In the winter, they came mostly by aeroplanes. Parts of the frozen Lake Ras were cleared of snow to create a runway.

Kunst Airport, located on the lake about 4 kilometers from the capital, was a fully-equipped airport complete with radio guidance systems for night landings and bad weather. However, it was only usable during the winter.

The luxury hotels by the lake were teeming with rich visitors. In the past, such facilities had been built with foreign capital; but local business improved dramatically about 15 years prior. Iks left the ranks of Roxche’s poorer nations, leapt over the median, and was joining the wealthy.

The aeroplane slowly cruised overhead and descended towards Lake Ras.

“There really ought to be regular flights here from Elitèsa all year round. Then even commoners could vacation here during the short winter holidays. ...And once we get proper pressurization devices on every aeroplane, we could even get visitors flying directly over the Central Mountain Range from cross-mountain,” Treize muttered to himself, envisioning the future of the tourism industry in Iks, “But there’s not enough land here to build any runways. And the lakeshore’s crowded with hotels... What if we filled in a long strip of the lake? Then people’re going to complain about the scenery being ruined or something.”

“What are you mumbling about, Treize?”

“Hm?”

Treize looked up. A police officer about 20 years of age was standing there. He wore a dark blue uniform and a hat. Because officers in the Kunst police department did not carry guns, they were all equipped with oaken truncheons. On the officer’s chest was a name tag that read ‘Piazza’.

“Oh, Officer Piazza. It’s been a while,” Treize said, still sitting on the bench.

Piazza had been a new recruit to the police force who practiced alongside Treize when the latter visited the Kunst police force’s shooting range. Being an outgoing man, he had often joked around with Treize, who was the only person younger than him at the range. Naturally, he

did not know Treize's true identity. Treize had always claimed that his parents ran an inn in a small valley.

"You can say that again, kiddo. Come practice at the station again sometime. Are you waiting for someone?"

Treize nodded.

"Didn't you hear, Treize? There was an avalanche on the southern pass. The night buses from Elitèsa are gonna be really late."

"I heard. How much longer are they going to take, do you think? And why was there an avalanche *there*, of all places?"

"You should wait in the cafe on the street corner or something. You'll see the bus when it arrives, anyway. That's what everyone else is doing."

"But if I did that, I'd make them wait for me here, even if it's only for a minute."

"Look what we have here!" Officer Piazza smirked impishly. "A VIP, then! Is it a girl?"

"Huh? Er..."

As Treize gaped silently, Piazza gave him a thumbs-up.

"It is! Hey, introduce me!"

"I...I'm going to have to refuse."

"What?! ...It pains me to say this, Treize, but you're under arrest."

"On what charges?"

"Erm...I'll think of that later."

"I've always wondered how you managed to join the police, Officer Piazza."

"Hey, hey. I've got dreams, y'know. Police officer's just the first step."

"Really?"

Piazza inflated at Treize's genuine curiosity. "I'll climb the ladder and join the royal guard someday! I'm going to protect Her Majesty the Queen and Her Highness the Princess for as long as I live."

Silently, Treize dared to wonder if Piazza would ever achieve his goal.

"Hey, don't get all serious on me, Treize. I *know* it's gonna be tough trying to join the royal guard. But I'll never get anywhere if I don't work hard."

"...You're right. Good luck."

"Thanks. Good luck to you, too."

"Huh?"

"Your bombshell lady. Take good care of her, and remember: put on a cool smile and make interesting conversation. Pick a tasteful inn. Make sure the bedroom is neat and tidy. And who knows? She just might give you a smoldering come-hither look and whisper, 'Take me to bed. Take me now'! Got all that, kiddo?"

'What the hell?!' Treize almost said. He suddenly felt very tired.

"Anyway, I'll see you later. They called in every officer on the force for security duty today. We'll be real busy until tomorrow morning." Piazza snickered, and left with a cheerful wave.

"Phew..."

Treize sighed and looked back into the sky. Snow was beginning to fall from the grey clouds.

Suddenly, he heard a loud honk. Treize cast a glance at the road—his wait was over. He stood from the bench.

Three buses came up in a line and stopped at the intersection. The passengers behind the windows looked exhausted.

The doors opened, and Lillia and Allison were the first to step out of the second bus. Treize quickly went up to them with a smile.

“It’s been a while, Allison. Lillia. Welcome to Ikstova!”

Mother and daughter simultaneously looked at Treize.

Allison was wearing sunglasses, a smile playing at her lips. Meanwhile, Lillia was clearly sleep-deprived and exhausted. Treize flinched upon meeting her gaze and staggered back.

“Whoa...”

Lillia approached him with a glare. And, speaking to him for the first time in six months, she squeezed out a hellish growl.

“Take me to a bed. Take me right now.”

* * *

The same morning, in Capital Standard Time—in other words, while Allison and Lillia were still busy shoveling snow.

Two men returned to Major Travas’s personal office in the Sou Be-Il embassy. The man in his twenties and the man in his forties. They were both wearing suits and carrying briefcases.

Axe greeted them at the entrance. When they asked her where the major was, she pointed them to the office. The men knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Major Travas answered. When Axe and the men stepped inside, Travas looked up from his book. Instead of a suit, he was wearing a brown Royal Army uniform. On the coat hanger in the corner was his coat and his hat, and a utility belt that included his holster and his gun.

The woman and the two men stood in front of the desk. They did not salute him. The man in his forties placed his briefcase at his feet and said, “We have our report on the bookkeeper and the group, sir.”

“Thank you. Let’s hear it.”

“Sir.”

The men reported the actions they had taken the previous evening.

The men had all gone outside and tailed the bookkeeper—a man in his fifties—who had been released on bail.

After saying goodbye to his lawyer, the bookkeeper had gone into a bar. One of the men posed as a patron and approached the bookkeeper, making small talk over drinks. They had not obtained any useful information by that point. All they found was that the bookkeeper lived alone.

The unsuspecting bookkeeper had accepted the man’s offer to share a taxi back, and disembarked at his apartment first. So the team then knew where he lived.

Late that night, the men easily infiltrated the bookkeeper’s home and searched his room while he slept. The team looked into his background and work records, among many other

things, and took photographs of seemingly important documents with a small camera before pulling out, leaving no trace of their presence.

They had returned to the embassy early in the morning to develop the photographs, and returned to the office afterwards.

“Any chance of detection?”

“We looked into it, but it’s unlikely. There’s no movement on the police’s end, either. He’s just a normal bean counter, with no criminal records to speak of. No suspicious activity other than this one. And we also got info on this ‘film crew’ from the documents. All the stuff the bastard wouldn’t tell us.”

“Continue.”

“It’s a production company. ‘Laurie Productions’. They’re actually making a nature documentary. Or rather, they founded the company *for* this film. They have no other works completed to date. They’re led by a young woman named Alicia Laurie. She must be quite well-off, seeing as she managed to start up a company singlehandedly. She has about 10 employees, mostly film crew. They’re a simple small-scale team with nothing strange of note. Other than how they illegally purchased film in secret to keep the project under wraps.”

“I see.” With that, Major Travas went silent.

“Was that a false lead, perhaps?” Axe asked hesitantly.

“We can’t be sure yet,” Major Travas said, leaving room for more possibilities, and turned to the man. “Do you know where they were filming?”

“Yes. Iks.”

“The Kingdom of Iks?” Major Travas repeated.

“Yes. Apparently they wanted to film the Central Mountain Range. They did some shooting in the Republic of Raputoa at the base of the mountains for a short time, but most of the filming took place in Iks. By cliffsides, the lake, or the mountains.”

“Iks certainly is beautiful all year round,” Axe noted.

The young man continued where the older left off, “It’s a popular tourist destination, and it’s not very accessible, so the film might actually hit it big in the Capital District.”

“Of course,” Major Travas said briefly, and fixed his glasses with his left hand.

“We looked through all the documents, but that is all we can confirm.”

“I understand. Thank you. Please get some rest,” said Major Travas. But the men exchanged glances instead of returning to their desks.

Axe cast them a quizzical look. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes. There’s just one thing we weren’t certain about. We weren’t sure whether to report it or not, but we thought you might ask us to tell you everything anyway,” said the man, opening his briefcase. He picked out a single photograph from a pile and handed it to Major Travas.

“Here.”

The black-and-white photograph depicted a letter. ‘PRODUCTION SCHEDULE’ was printed in Roxchean at the very top of the page, and typed underneath was a neat schedule of the summer’s filming. It was a perfectly normal document that disclosed what days the team would be in Iks, what they would be shooting and for how long, and when they would be coming back to the Capital District. On the top right was written the name of the company and its address.

“It’s a simple letter. Nothing wrong with it in and of itself, but take a look at the bottom.”

Hand-written at the very bottom of the letter were several sentences. They were short phrases written with a fountain pen. From the punctuation it was clear they were words with meaning, but the sentences were not written in Roxchean or any language of Sou Be-II.

"It looks like a personal postscript the sender added, but we just can't figure out what language this is written in," said the older man.

Axe furrowed her brow. "I can't tell, either. The characters themselves look closer to Iltoan than Roxchean..."

"We thought you might know, Major, since you're a walking encyclopedia and all," the younger man joked.

"This is Ikstovan," Major Travas said, as nonchalant as though he had been asked for directions in his own hometown. Everyone was quiet.

Eventually, the man in his twenties broke the silence.

"Major...what is 'Ikstovan'?"

"Exactly what it sounds like—the language of the Kingdom of Iks. It was used before the creation of the Roxchean language."

"Ah, right. I'd completely forgotten that they made Roxchean when the Confederation was first founded. But Major, can you read this?"

"Of course not." Major Travas chuckled. "I'll have to look up a dictionary."

"Where would you find one? ...A library?"

"Right here," Major Travas said, as laid-back as ever, and walked over to the bookshelf. He opened a door at the bottom and pulled out a thick old book, then gingerly placed it on his desk.

"This is an Ikstovan-Roxchean dictionary. It was published a century ago to preserve the language for future generations. But supposedly, there are less than 1000 copies left in the world. I doubt even the National Library has one."

"Major..." the younger man said, jaw on the floor, "I know a good subordinate doesn't poke his nose into his superior's business—that goes double for us spies—but I have to ask... Why do *you* have this book?"

A very long time ago, when he was still known by a different name, Major Travas had received the book from the newly-crowned queen of Iks as a sign of gratitude for his service to the country.

"That's a secret," Major Travas replied with a smile.

Then, he got to work on deciphering the text. First, he copied out the characters on the letter onto a piece of paper and looked up the words in the dictionary, one by one. He allowed Axe and the others to go back to the office for some rest, but they chose to wait and watched in fascination as he decoded the message.

"It's a difficult language indeed. This should be... 'An eighteen'? No. 'The eighteen'... 'High'. No, in this case, it would be 'long'."

But over time, even Major Travas's enthusiastic mumblings gave way to silence. The men simply exchanged glances, and Axe held her concerned gaze on the major's profiled face.

Finally.

"There. I think I have the gist of it," Major Travas said grimly.

"What does it say?" asked Axe.

Major Travas said nothing, simply handing her the piece of paper with the rough Roxchean translation. Axe read it out immediately.

“The eighteen years were long. But the nineteenth year will never come. We have already resolved. To do what we must’.”

“What does that mean?” “Hm...some sort of resolution,” the two men speculated.

Axe furrowed her brow. “Revenge’? ‘Eighteen years’? Took them long enough—”

But Major Travas cut her off, calling one of the men by name. “What of the crew? Do you know where they are now?”

“Apparently they’re still shooting. They’ve been in Iks for the past few days.”

It was then that the man realized, to his shock, that Major Travas looked like he had swallowed a bug.

“Is something the matter, Major?”

“Yes, actually.” Major Travas nodded. “Eighteen years...revenge... Eighteen years...”

He repeated the words to himself as Axe and the others looked on.

The men turned to Axe as though urging her. She took up their plea. “Eighteen years ago would be around the time the Mural of the Beacon was discovered, Major. Did something happen in Iks at that time? Did *anything* happen?”

The answer made no sense to Axe and the others.

“Just one shot’.”

“Hm? Major?”

Major Travas picked up the receiver. Then—

“...But what if I’m wrong?”

Putting the receiver back down, he suddenly got to his feet. And as the others recovered from their shock, he made a declaration.

“I’m going on vacation!”

“Sir?”

“Axe, I’ll be using up all the vacation days I’ve accumulated.”

“Very good, sir.”

“I’ll be leaving today. I won’t be back for days, at the very least. Likely not for the rest of the year.”

“That’s not a problem, sir,” replied the man in his forties, “It’s the end of the year. We don’t have much to do. Destination?”

“The Kingdom of Iks.”

The man in his forties spoke again.

“You’re planning to act for Iks, then?”

“I am.”

“I’d like to convince you otherwise, as we have no idea if His Majesty would approve.”

“The responsibility is all mine. In fact, this might turn out to be the better choice for His Majesty in the long run. Although I can’t say why just yet.”

“I understood the first part clearly,” the older man said, backing down.

The younger man clapped his hands together. “Great! I’ll wake up the team. ‘Let’s go, people! The major’s taking us on vacation to the land of snowy mountains!’.”

“I haven’t said a thing about taking everyone else.”

“But you will. Won’t you?”

Major Travas chuckled.

“I won’t need to anymore.”

“Yes! We’re going by aeroplane, right? I’ll get us the fastest craft in Roxche! Night-capable with a decent pilot, too. He used to do aerobatics, and he’ll do anything for the right price.”

“I’m counting on you, then. ...Axe?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Sign out weapons from the armory under my name.”

“Yes, sir. How many?”

“Enough for everyone. Also pick up winter combat gear.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll also need an explanation for why we need combat gear while on vacation in Iks. What shall I write?”

Major Travas’s reply was immediate.

“How about ‘in case of wolf attack’?”

“That might be a little weak, sir.”

“Then...snow monsters,” Major Travas said without a hint of humor. Axe grimaced.

“Wolves it is.”

Minutes later, the office was empty.

A Royal Army uniform and a utility belt hung from the coat hanger in Major Travas’s room, but the gun and the holster were gone.

* * *

In the snowy forest was a house.

Though snow continued to pile up, about half the stone foundation was still exposed. The building atop it was a log cabin about 20 meters square. All around it were trees and gentle slopes covered in snow, and not a single house in sight.

The cottage was two stories tall with a half-basement in the foundation. Most of the first floor was a very large living room, with the rest a kitchen and a bathroom. Wooden supports jutted up to part of the second floor, half of which was open to the first floor. The rest was divided into two bedrooms.

On the large rectangular table were silverware, candlesticks, wineglasses, and large plates. However—

“Phew... “

Treize was sitting there alone, sighing. He was wearing a checkered woolen shirt and long pants. Silver lids were placed over the some of the dishes, and other dishes were covered by plates for lack of covers. Naturally, the candles were not lit.

A fire burned quietly in the fireplace in the corner. Wood crumbled to ash on occasion. The world outside the thick-framed windows was submerged in grey shadows. Countless snowflakes fluttered to the ground.

“I’m hungry.”

Quietly, Treize stood and left the table. He went up to the long sofa arranged in front of the fireplace and, with the back of his knees over the armrest, fell back.

He glanced up at the clock, upside-down from the sofa. It was 4:30 in the afternoon.

"Maybe I should get some sleep too," he mumbled, and closed his eyes.

Earlier that afternoon.

Soon after Lillia and Allison arrived, Treize went up to a black taxi cab by the bus stop with the sign 'on break' displayed on the windshield, and spoke to the driver. Treize took the passenger seat, and Lillia and Allison sat in the back.

"Get some sleep on the way, Lillia."

"No. The next time I close my eyes, it will be in a bed. I'm sick of sleeping in seats."

The taxi drove down the zigzagging streets.

The driver in his sixties was actually a member of the royal guard, and the taxi was also a property of the royal family prepared for occasions like this.

As the snow came down harder, the car headed southwest from downtown Kunst.

Just outside Kunst was a hill country, which was uncommon in Iks. The area was owned by the royal family and there were no homes or villages within a 30-kilometer radius. The old palace on the shores of Lake Ras, which was burned down in a terrorist attack decades ago, had been converted into a large park.

The current palace, built in the heart of the park, overlooked the park and the city from a hill. It was a wooden four-story building based on the old palace, and the semicircular hangar by the lake was connected to it through an underground passage.

A road stretched along the southern edge of the premises. It circled the lake, but it was closed over the winter because of snow and ice; the lake itself was used for travel instead. There was a gate and a guardhouse labeled 'Closed for Winter' a short distance from Kunst, but the taxi ignored it. The policeman at the guardhouse did not stop the car, either.

Eventually, they reached a fork. The road ahead was snowed in, so the car had to turn right. Hundreds of meters along the narrow road later, they reached a house along the slope of a gentle hill.

"We're here. This is a rental cottage some of our acquaintances run. It's good for the summer, but they close it down during the winter because it's so hard to get to. So I managed to rent the whole thing this time," Treize explained, reciting a lie. Although the cottage was private property on paper, it was actually owned by the royal family. It was located on the southern tip of the royal family's land.

"Wow." Allison nodded as she stepped out of the car.

"But does it have good beds?" Lillia growled, her eyes half-closed. She disembarked.

Treize took their bags and led them inside. Lillia did not even glance at the food prepared for her and staggered upstairs in search of a bed.

Wooden walls, wooden beds. Clean sheets and warm-looking feather blankets.

"Not bad..." Lillia mumbled with a look at the tidy bedrooms. And, taking off nothing but her boots, she collapsed into one of the beds.

"Oh...a bed...hello, dreamland..."

And she fell right asleep.

Time passed quietly. It was just past eight in the evening.

“Hm...”

Treize woke to a dim light upstairs. When he sat himself up, he caught a glimpse of golden hair fluttering in the kitchen.

“It looks good,” Allison said when she noticed Treize was awake, and picked up some of the cold food. Treize stood and went over to the kitchen.

“Let me warm that up for you.”

“No, it’s all right. Lillia’s still asleep, and I’m going out now.”

“But what about the new year’s party?” Treize asked.

Allison grinned and replied in a singsong voice, “Have fun, you two.”

Treize’s jaw dropped.

“I’m asking you as her mother to take care of Lillia. Now if you’ll excuse me, the third wheel will get out of the way shortly.”

“R-right...”

“I mean, no one can make your decisions for you, right?”

“I...I suppose you’re right,” Treize said dubiously, “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to enjoy the party in downtown Kunst. I might come back to sleep tomorrow.”

“I understand. I’ll call the driver.”

“Thank you, Treize.”

Treize picked up the phone on the display case by the wall and called the fake taxi. Then he put down the receiver. “The driver’s at the guardhouse and says he’ll be here shortly.”

“Thank you. By the way, can you make normal calls on that telephone?” asked Allison. Treize shook his head.

“No. The phone lines here connect only to important places like the villa, the palace, and the police, which is routed through the villa. You can’t call other places.”

“I see. Make sure to come up with a good excuse if Lillia decides she wants to call someone.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Or you can tell her everything and take her over to the other end. That’s why you invited us here, right?” Allison asked, serious.

Treize was silent for a moment. He balled his left hand into a fist and placed it over his chest. “No one can make your decisions for you’, you said.”

Allison nodded. Her hair shimmered as it shook. “I did. The night’s still young. Plenty of time for a long talk. Good luck, Treize.”

Allison put on her coat, pulled her hair out of the coat, and put on her hat. Then she slung her purse over her shoulder and checked for her wallet.

“What are Fi and Benedict doing tonight?” she asked about the queen and her husband.

“They’re hosting new year’s party at the villa.”

“Oh, right. They do that every year, right? Inviting a group of guests for the night for a home-cooked meal with them.”

“Yes.” Treize nodded.

“I heard you invited the Vice President’s family last year.”

“Yes. Even the children were loud and outgoing.”

“Oh? Did you attend, too?”

“No, I was staying here. But I dropped in because I got bored—and I saw a big mess of drunk people. Then again, we got the northern pass expansion project funded by the Confederation the next spring thanks to the dinner, so it wasn’t all that bad.”

“That’s Fi for you. Talk about some real talent. What kind of people are coming this year?”

“I heard it was a film crew.”

“Making a nature documentary?”

“How did you know? They were shooting in secret, so they even hid their cameras in dugouts. Almost no one around here knows. Did Mother tell you?”

“Nope,” Allison replied nonchalantly, “We actually came on the same aeroplane as some of the crew. We heard about it from them in person.”

“I see. They’re close to completing the work, so I suppose it doesn’t have to be kept secret much longer now. They’ve been filming everywhere this past year.”

“I can’t wait to see it.”

“Yeah. Mother and Father are very interested, too. They’re so happy that the documentary can pass on the views of our landscapes to the future. So they accepted the crew when they applied for this year’s dinner. I heard they’re even going to shoot tonight’s festivities—discreetly, of course. ... Oh, he’s here.”

The taxi’s headlights blinked in the snow as it stopped in front of the cottage. The driver stepped outside with an umbrella in hand.

“Take care of Lillia.”

With that, Allison twisted her right pointer and middle fingers together and saluted Treize. It was a Western gesture for wishing someone luck.

Lightly but solemnly, Treize bowed his head.

The taxi carrying Allison disappeared into the growing snowfall.

“She’s counting on me, huh.”

And Treize and Lillia were left alone in the cottage.

Chapter 3: Festival Fire

Deeper within the premises of the new royal palace was a separate building Treize called a villa. It stood on a hill hundreds of meters from the lake and about 10 kilometers from the heavily guarded gate by the main palace.

The villa was three stories high and had a basement. Its foundations and outer wall were made of grey stone. The interior and the roof were wooden. A single chimney rose from the heavily slanted roof.

From overhead the villa was almost perfectly square. Each side was about 30 meters long. There was a large parking area south of the building, in which direction the main doors faced. On the northern side, where the hill sloped down, the first and second floors were connected. The interior of the foundation served as the basement.

It was a humble building at first glance, little different from a mountain lodge. When the palace and the villa were built 16 years prior, the then-recently-crowned Queen Francesca had commanded that as little money be spent on the construction as possible and that the buildings be simple. After all, the famously secretive royal family had no reason to make a show of splendor with buildings that no civilian would ever see.

Gentle hills surrounded the area. And naturally, there were no other houses in sight. From the northern side of the house the 100 kilometer-long Lake Ras was visible at a glance. And on clear days, even the majestic peaks of the mountain range around the water were clear from the windows.

The queen, her husband, and Princess Meriel usually spent their days in the royal palace under the constant supervision of guards. But when they were free, and whenever possible, they relaxed in the villa to spend time together as family.

Entry to the villa area was restricted. No uniformed guards were in sight. Only some residents of the queen's former home—the village in the valley—worked there as servants.

And on the last day of the year, just before nine in the evening.

"Fiona—I mean, Your Majesty, are you inside?"

A plump, middle-aged woman wearing an apron over her dress knocked on the door. She was one of the servants, who looked like any other woman her age.

"Yes."

A woman's voice spoke from inside. The middle-aged woman excused herself and opened the door. Beyond was a walk-in closet about the size of a small room. Staring into the closet filled with completely ordinary clothing, the woman sighed.

"Fi...what are you *doing*?"

The queen of Ikstova and her husband were making out.

Francesca, the youngest queen in the world, was not yet 40. She was slender and had fair skin and short black hair. And as usual, she wore a maroon skirt and a white blouse like any ordinary woman would.

As queen, her name was Francesca. But the few who knew her well called her Fiona, or 'Fi' for short.

Wrapping his hands firmly around her waist and showering her with passionate kisses in spite of the time and place was her husband the Hero of the Mural, Carr Benedict.

He was about a head taller than his wife, and had a rugged build. His messy brown hair was tied back in a ponytail and a beard covered his face. In his green cargo pants and grey wool jacket he was dressed just as comfortably—if not even more so—as his wife.

They continued to lock lips for about four seconds before finally turning.

“All right. Are preparations finished?” Fiona asked as though nothing was wrong. The middle-aged woman replied that they were ready for quite some time. Then,

“The guests will be arriving shortly. ... Your Majesty, I am happy to see that you and your husband are still very much in love, but you two aren’t young people anymore.”

The woman sounded like she was scolding a young lady in the neighborhood and not a queen, but no one working in the building cared for such formalities.

Benedict replied in fluent Roxchean, “Then shall we go have ourselves a lively night?”

“I suppose. Although sometimes I wish we could have a cozier start to the new year.”

The middle-aged woman held open the door for them. “Please don’t do that in front of the film cameras.”

The queen and her husband smiled at each other.

“Then...” Fiona began. Benedict nodded. “...One more time.”

They locked lips once again.

The middle-aged woman sighed, incredulous.

It was just past nine in the evening.

Light shone from the villa windows and faintly lit the dark, snowy world outside. The snow was coming down harder as it endlessly covered the lands and the roof.

A pair of headlights shook and bobbed towards the villa. Eventually, a mid-sized bus and its chain-equipped tires emerged, crushing the snow underneath.

A light on the second floor wall came on. Two male servants in their fifties stepped out of the south doors to greet the guests. The bus stopped at the small, illuminated square before the doors.

The bus’s door opened and a middle-aged man in a coat disembarked.

“Please watch your step,” he said, waiting for the next person. The man was a royal servant, and the one following him was one of the guests for that evening.

First outside was a woman in her mid-twenties. She was beautiful with cold, attractive features. Her long black hair was pinned at the back, and she wore an expensive-looking fur coat.

She took several steps forward to let the others off the bus.

Then she silently looked up at the villa.

In all, one woman and eight men stepped off the bus.

The men were all wearing similar suits in dark blue or black. Two were in their forties, and the rest were somewhere between their fifties to their sixties. Among them were the three men who had taken the same aeroplane as Lillia. The men began to unload large black boxes from the luggage compartment of the bus.

“Let’s go, Miss,” said a man in his sixties, who had a shock of white hair. He met the woman’s eyes.

The beautiful woman glared.

“Call me ‘Leader’,” she said in a clear soprano voice and walked to the door, where a smiling middle-aged couple in aprons waited.

“Excuse me. Let’s go, Leader,” the man replied, sounding strangely happy, and followed.

Ten in the evening. The cottage.

“This is pretty good. It’s *really* good.”

Lillia was eating. The food on the table was all warmed up and waiting on their large plates.

“Gimme some of that next. And pass the vinegar.”

“Of course.”

And she was treating the apron-clad Treize like a servant. A cutesy pair of waterfowl were embroidered on the cream-colored apron.

Treize put some more food onto Lillia’s plate. She devoured it.

“This is good, too. Tea, please.”

“Yes, Milady.”

Lillia and Treize were alone in the cottage. The kettle over the fireplace began to whistle. It was still snowing heavily outside.

“It’s all delicious. Even the water’s good, which even makes the tea taste better.”

“I am honored, Milady,” Treize said with a courteous bow.

Lillia nodded. “Good work, servant. You may now seat yourself and partake in the meal,” she said with exaggerated self-importance.

“Finally.”

Treize took off his apron, rolled it up, and placed it next to his seat. Then he sat down across from Lillia.

Several dishes were on the long, narrow table. Small deep-fried fish marinated in vinegar. Steamed pork. Boiled vegetable salad. Venison pie. Fried pumpkin filled with minced meat. Several kinds of bread and cheese. Cinnamon-baked apples. Multiple kinds of tea separated by leaf and the presence of milk, each pot covered with an Ikstovan-style patchwork tea cozy.

“This is amazing. Don’t tell me you made all this yourself.”

“No, a lady I know helped me out. Sorry there’s no chicken this year, though—it doesn’t really feel like an end-of-the-year party without one,” Treize said, bringing some food onto his plate. “All right.”

And, using his fork like a shovel, he wolfed down his food.

“Where’re your table manners, Treize?”

“Oh. Excuse me.”

At Lillia’s scolding, Treize began to eat as elegantly as he had at the hotel restaurant, using both a fork and a knife.

“You must’ve been hungry.”

“Starving,” he replied. Rather than risk her wrath by waking her up, Treize had waited for Lillia to open her eyes. Then he had to wait until she was finished showering and was busy heating up all the food. But strangely enough, he was adamant about using utensils to eat all his food. “Someone kept me waiting.”

“You don’t have to put it that way,” Lillia said, waving off the answer to her own question. “What was Mom thinking, anyway?”

“...I’m not sure.” Treize lied. Lillia didn’t seem to care.

“Oh well. Let’s eat.”

“Yeah. It’s our last meal.”

“Whoa, let’s not get too ominous.”

“What...? Oh. I meant ‘last meal of the year’.”

“All right, then.”

Though their dinner began with a conversation, eventually both Lillia and Treize put all their energy into eating.

Just as Lillia and Treize enjoyed the last meal of the year—

There was a room in the royal villa that took up half the second floor.

It was a large and rectangular hall about the size of a classroom. There was no balcony on the north-facing wall—instead there were large windows that reached from waist-level to the ceiling. Flames were roaring in the fireplaces on either side of the hall. Sofas were placed in front of the walls, and there was a table at the center of the room. Atop it were dishes similar to those Lillia and Treize were enjoying, along with alcoholic beverages.

In the hall were the guests for the evening and the servants in charge of greeting them. They were all waiting for the hostess and host of the party, Queen Francesca and her husband.

The servants chosen to wait on the guests were all older, being from the village in the valley. Most were middle-aged at the very least, and some even looked like grandparents—in total, 15 servants were present. They were in charge of bringing in food and drinks. All of them wore comfortable clothes they might wear at home, making the aprons over them even more eye-catching.

Eight men and a woman were the guests that evening—the employees and owner of Laurie Productions, who had been shooting a documentary in Iks for over a year.

Like before, the men were dressed impeccably in suits with ties. They all wore name cards that also served as identification. There was no filming equipment in sight.

The woman standing in their midst wore a white blouse and black dress pants. The name ‘Laurie’ was written on her name card. She and the men had all changed into low-heeled shoes from the boots they had on for the walk through the snow.

“Thank you for waiting. Announcing Her Majesty Queen Francesca and her husband, Sir Benedict,” an elderly woman declared in all formality, though she lacked the pomp of a royal guard in ceremonial uniform. All eyes turned to the large double doors. Two old women opened them.

Fiona—playing the role of Queen Francesca—and her husband Benedict entered together. Like before, they were dressed in comfortable clothing.

At that moment, the men applauded.

Laurie’s beautiful eyes narrowed. She was not smiling—it was clearly a hostile glare.

“Smile, Leader,” the man next to her whispered, and the hostility was gone in a flash. Laurie beamed as though she were a different person and joined the applause.

A name card labeled 'Elvar' was on the breast of the man who spoke to Laurie. He was the one she had scolded at the doors about calling her 'Leader'.

Fiona's eyes landed on the men and the woman, and she slowly approached them with a smile. Fiona stopped in front of the woman and offered a handshake.

"So we finally meet, Ms. Laurie. I am Francesca. Welcome to Iks."

The fake smile was still on Laurie's face when she stopped clapping and bowed her head. Then she accepted the handshake. "It is an honor to behold you, Your Majesty. Alicia Laurie of Laurie Productions."

"No, the honor is all mine. I've seen some of the footage, and it's marvelous. It's like looking at Ikstova today with my own two eyes. I can't wait to see the film completed," Fiona confessed. Laurie curtly thanked her.

Afterwards, Fiona introduced Laurie to Benedict, and Laurie introduced Fiona to her employees. And everyone invited to the dinner was given mugs of beer for the toast.

It was the queen's role to propose the toast. She thanked the film crew, the subjects who supported her, and the kingdom, and briefly mentioned her hopes for the new year.

"Let's have a wonderful time tonight. Cheers!"

The sound of clinking mugs filled the villa. But back at the cottage—

"Done..."

"I'm stuffed."

"I can't move an inch."

"Me neither..."

Lillia and Treize were sprawled out in the living room.

Lillia was lying on the sofa with her legs over the armrest, just as Treize had earlier.

Treize was leaning back in a dining chair with his feet on another chair, his gaze on the ceiling.

Two of the eight plates on the table were covered with silver lids. The rest were clean.

"Lillia?"

"Yeah?"

"If you lie down right after you eat..."

"I don't care."

"I see."

"Yep."

They reclined lazily. There wasn't a hint of romance in the air.

"Oh well. I'm going to take a break..."

"Yeah. Let's rest until we digest some of this food..."

Their cozy new year's eve passed meaninglessly. Wood crackled in the fireplace sometimes and crumbled to ash.



While Lillia and Treize explored the limits of laziness in the cottage, the party at the villa was in full swing.

After dinner, the table at the center had been moved to the wall and was laden with drinks and snacks. The guests were sitting on the sofas. The film crew, Benedict, and the other men—the ones who lived in the village in the valley—were chuckling over entertaining production stories. The film crew, however, stopped drinking partway and declined any more drink, no matter how much the hosts and servants offered.

Laurie, the guest of honor, spoke little as she sat off to the side with a teacup in hand. She had acted no differently during the meal. Even when Fiona spoke to her, she would only give simple answers like “Yes”, “No”, or “I see”. Eventually, the film crew had to step in.

“She must be so nervous to see Your Majesty in person,” one of them said.

After the meal, Laurie simply sat and listened. She made no conversation with the queen or Benedict.

But the party was mostly a friendly affair. The clock on the wall continued to mark even time towards the new year.

The cottage. Just before midnight.

“Lillia.”

“Hm?”

Still lounging on his chair, Treize turned to Lillia on the sofa.

“It’s almost the new year.”

“I see,” Lillia replied indifferently.

Treize was silent for a moment before speaking again.

“Hey...wanna eat some more?”

“What, are you planning to fatten me up and roast me like a pig?”

The conversation did not continue.

The villa. Just before midnight.

“Thank you for your permission. We’ll make sure to show you the footage before we use it,” one of the crew members said to Fiona and Benedict. He was the camera operator, a man just shy of fifty with his thinning hair cropped short. The name card on his chest read, ‘Morès’.

“We’ll be right back with the equipment,” he said. Two other men stood to assist him. Fiona asked a middle-aged woman to guide them to the room where they kept the guests’ belongings. The woman led the three men out of the hall.

Laurie glanced at the watch under her left sleeve. It was a men’s wristwatch with a large face and a leather strap. Fiona noticed it.

“I see you’re wearing a men’s watch, Ms. Laurie.”

Surprisingly, Laurie beamed as though her frigid face had been a mask. “Yes. It’s a memento of my father.”

Fiona was taken aback at the word ‘memento’. Benedict cast her a look. Elvar, who had been near Laurie the entire time, also gave Laurie a concerned glance.

“Don’t worry, ma’am. He passed away when I was still young. He left us an inheritance, and I had an affluent upbringing. It’s thanks to him that I can make films almost on a whim like this. I’m always very grateful to him. Even more so when I look at his watch.”

Laurie was being more talkative than ever. She showed no reservations about revealing her past.

“I see. I also—”

The moment Fiona began,

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

The doors opened, and the men returned with their equipment—a film camera, a tripod, a battery for the camera, and a microphone, among other things. The camera was about the size of a small suitcase, and rolls of film were fixed to the front and back like a large pair of ears.

The men set up the tripod near the middle of the hall, expertly secured the camera atop it, then placed the hefty battery box next to it. The camera was positioned to capture about half of the room.

Laurie watched as Fiona and Benedict looked on, then glanced at her watch. There were still about 10 minutes to midnight. Elvar approached from behind without a sound.

“I think we’re ready, Leader.”

“Five minutes to go!” “Five more minutes!”

In Kunst, the crowds were shouting.

The city was alight with energy in spite of the falling snow. Stalls lined every street, and children and adults alike went to and fro with layers of snow over them. Loud music played everywhere from records and live bands.

“I wonder how our little prince is doing?”

Allison was sitting by herself at a table by the street, wearing her hat and coat. There was a parasol over the round table, and steam rose from the cup of tea in front of her. The other tables were also filled with guests, but most were couples or families. Allison was the only one alone.

Elegantly, she picked up her cup and took a relaxed sip before placing it back on the table.

“Maybe I’ll eat him alive if he doesn’t manage this time.”

At the same time, someone shouted,

“Four minutes left!”

The cottage.

“Ugh...”

Treize opened his eyes shivering, sitting up and shaking his head with a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lillia. Treize looked at her. The clock on the wall beyond her and the sofa indicated that the end of the year was nigh.

“Nothing. I just felt a chill...”

“Maybe you caught a cold?”

“I don’t think I did... Anyway, it’s almost the new year.”

“Yeah...” Lillia also glanced at the clock, but did not get up. “Man, what is Mom thinking?” she grumbled.

“In Ikstova, we start a countdown a few minutes before the new year. And the moment the new year starts, we scatter confetti and hug our friends and family or jump into the air,” Treize said. Then he added, his tone dropping, “Then again, it’s just the two of us here.”

“Hm... Maybe we should sing a song or something? Bring some cheer to the place?”

“If you want to.”

The villa.

“One more minute!”

The countdown continued in the party hall on the second floor. Everyone in the building gathered inside. Even the servants washing dishes in the kitchen and the servants standing watch at the doors. Everyone was holding paper bags filled with confetti. The film crew gathered by the camera in the center of the room, preparing to shoot. They stood with their backs to the wall and occupied the entire eastern side of the room, waiting to film the servants and Benedict greet the new year.

“Forty seconds. Let’s try not to make any mistakes,” said one of the servants.

“Not to worry. There aren’t any clocks in the shot, so we can do as many retakes as we need,” Morès replied with his eye pressed against the viewfinder. Everyone burst out laughing.

The men around the camera exchanged glances, nodding discreetly.

“Fifteen seconds.”

The men moved. One squatted by the battery box at his feet and opened the metallic lid. Another opened the film magazine as the camera began rolling. Another man reached over and unlocked, then opened the camera itself.

“Five seconds,” someone said.

The men pulled out submachine guns.

They were small models about 30 centimeters in length, affixed with folded wire stocks. In front of the grip and the trigger were magazines that held 20 rounds. Each man held the grip with his right hand and pulled the part jutting from either side of the gun to load the first round.

Fiona, among a large majority of the others in the room, watched the entire process. But no one could react immediately to the sight of the men taking out one submachine gun after another from their camera.

“Three...two...one...” someone who had yet to notice continued to count down, “Happy new year!”

The voice was quickly drowned out by gunfire.

“Oh. It’s the new year.”

“Yeah. Happy new year!”

“Happy new year, Lillia. Hope we get along this year too.”

“Yep.”

“...Don’t you have anything else to say?”

“Hm? Nope.”

“It’s 3306! Happy new year, everyone!”

As confetti filled the air, people hugged one another, jumped into the air, and shouted out loud. Fireworks launched from the lakeside drew bright patterns on the clouds.

“Another year,” Allison said, raising her teacup toward the glowing sky.

The men opened fire.

Each man held firmly onto the grip with his right hand and the magazine with his left, pointing the gun at the ceiling before shooting on automatic. Gunfire filled the room. The bullets carved holes through the roof and the walls. Splinters danced in the air and shell casings scattered to the floor.

Only four of the eight men had opened fire, but a total of 80 rounds had been used in the span of three seconds. And just as suddenly as it had begun, the warning barrage came to an end.

“Nobody move!” Elvar threatened, submachine gun in hand. The men stood with the camera at the center and pointed their guns in every direction. The four who had opened fire quickly switched magazines.

Fiona was on the floor; the women near her had pushed her down the moment the barrage began. She glared incredulously at the men.

“Damn it...”

Benedict was crouched with the people around him. He swore and dropped his bag of confetti to the floor.

Nine people in the center of the room, and 17 around them. It seemed time had frozen, but at that moment the servant nearest to the camera—an old man well over 70—rose without a sound and charged. His target was the camera operator who was distracted receiving a submachine gun from his friend. Morès, who had just made the last joke of the previous year.

“Morès! Look out!” one of the men shouted, but it was too late. The old man rammed into Morès’s side.

“Urgh!”

With a distorted scream, his body bent.

“Damn you!”

The man who was handing the gun to Morès punched the old man. The small old man flew almost a meter backwards. At that moment, the men realized that the old man was holding a fruit knife. And that it was stained red.

“...Damn...he got me...” Morès muttered feebly and leaned against the tripod. His side was stained a dark red.

“We told you to freeze.”

A short, fat man whose name card read ‘Kirk’ took aim at the old man with one hand and pulled the trigger.

Four clear shots. Blood spewed from the old man’s belly as he made to stand. The fruit knife fell to the floor.

“Gah.”

The old man exhaled blood and air before he collapsed. When the gunfire ended, shell casings clinked against the camera on their way to the floor.

“Argh...that hurts, damn it...” Morès groaned.

“It’s gonna be fine. Get a hold of yourself—we’ll stop the bleeding. Hey, someone get the morphine—” said the man supporting the wounded Morès, “You bastards...”

The old man with four gunshot wounds raised his head, blood spilling from his stomach. “How, dare, you—”

Bang.

The gunshot swallowed his voice partway. Fiona, Benedict, and the servants—all huddled down—looked at the source of the gunshot.

“Does it look like I care?!”

Laurie’s soprano voice filled the room. She held a small revolver in her right hand and stood before the camera. A thin wisp of smoke rose from the muzzle of her gun. It pointed at a corpse bleeding from its wrinkled forehead.

“Who’s next?” Laurie threatened, shifting her gaze along with her aim. From Benedict in the rightmost corner to Fiona in the left near her, she looked at everyone in the room.

Several seconds of silence passed.



“That’s enough,” Fiona finally said, getting to her feet. The women around her tried to stop her, but she batted their hands aside.

“So Her Majesty is unharmed.” Laurie angrily glared—and took aim at—Fiona. She bared her white teeth and grimaced.

Fiona took a sharp breath, but she refused to falter and quickly replied, “Everyone, that’s enough futile resistance. Stay where you are.”

“Hah! I expected nothing less from Her Majesty.” Laurie snorted and walked up to Fiona. With a frigid glare she held out her right hand. The muzzle of her gun stopped only a few dozen centimeters from Fiona’s face. “But you think that’s going to save you? Didn’t you consider that we might be after your life?” She smirked.

Fiona narrowed her eyes, afraid. But she quickly put on an elegant smile. “No. If that were your goal, you would have killed me already.”

“Hmph. I’ll be sure to kill you over and over again once we’re through with business.”

Laurie swung her gun downward, gesturing for Fiona to sit. Fiona took two steps back and sat among the servants.

“Leader.”

Someone called to Laurie. She turned. Between the men standing in a circle with submachine guns at the ready was Morès. He was gasping on the floor. A pool of blood was spreading under him.

Laurie quickly walked over to him.

“Leader... I’m sorry... I let my guard down...” he said, his empty eyes grasping for her. He seemed to be in no pain thanks to the morphine shots. Laurie knelt at his left side and smiled. She looked nothing like the woman who had just threatened Fiona.

“Not to worry. This is just a mark of honor—a light injury. I’ve taken care of the bastard who did this to you.”

Then, she glanced at the man sitting on Mores’s right. He was a slender man in his mid-fifties with a name card that read, ‘Jake’. Jake quietly shook his head. Morès was not going to make it.

For a moment, Laurie looked like she was on the verge of wailing. She glared at Jake. But he did not even try to correct himself.

One of the men turned to Morès and said nonchalantly, as though pointing out the latter had dropped something of little value, “Hey Morès, don’t worry Leader too much, you hear?”

“Ha ha... I’m sorry... Leader...”

“I told you, it’s all right.” She took Mores’s bloodied left hand in her own.

“Leader...you’ll get your hand dirty...”

Several seconds later, Morès closed his eyes. Jake put his fingers against Mores’s neck.

“He’s gone.”

The hostage-takers each took half a second to mourn in turns.

“Damn it... Damn it...”

Protected by the men, holding the hand of the corpse, Laurie began to sob without a care for who was watching.

"I'm bored."

Lillia pouted, putting a log into the fireplace.

"Yeah."

Treize agreed from the single-seater sofa.

Lillia turned with another log in hand. "Not like you've got any right to say that. You're the one who picked—" Lillia's tone dropped. "...Sorry. It's 'cause the bus was late, isn't it? We were supposed to go see the festival at night after dinner."

"Why don't we head out now? We can still enjoy the celebrations. Although we might not find Allison in the crowd," Treize suggested.

"Hmm..."

Lillia thought for a moment, then tossed the log aside. "Sure. That sounds good."

"All right."

Treize rolled back and climbed off the sofa. Then he went over to the phone and picked up the receiver.

"Hello? Yes, happy new year. Actually, we wanted to go out to Kunst for the—huh? Oh. Okay, I see... No, no. There's nothing you could do about that. Yeah. Don't worry about it. Thank you. All right."

The call ended.

Treize put down the receiver and turned. Lillia was cringing in front of the fire.

"I can take a guess...but let me hear it," she said. Treize responded.

"Yeah, it's about the car. They said there's too much snow...the snowplows always come early in the morning, you know..."

"I knew it! First the avalanche, now this! It looks like the snow really hates me."

She flopped onto the carpet angrily, but hit her head on the edge of the sofa.

"Ouch."

Laurie hung her head and sobbed for about three minutes.

Fiona, Benedict, and the servants looked on.

They quietly watched the young woman weep, clinging to her friend's body beside the body of the man she had killed. Her cries were punctuated by fireworks from Kunst popping in the distance.

As Laurie's sobs came to an end,

"I'm sure Morès will be happy," Elvar said gently on behalf of the other men.

"The dead can't feel happiness," Laurie hissed.

"You're right. And the living must do what only the living can do, Miss."

Wiping her tears with her sleeve, Laurie looked up. Her swollen red eyes met Elvar's gaze.

"Call me 'Leader'."

"Excuse me, Leader. Let's begin," Elvar said with a smile.

"All right. You can take the new year's greeting."

"Understood," Elvar said, and rose. "Everyone."

His voice resounded in the quiet hall.

“This building is under our control. We will kill anyone who attempts to resist. We also wish to avoid causing any unnecessary deaths, so please obey the queen’s earlier command.”

Elvar remained as polite as ever even as he threatened the hostages. That only made him sound more dangerous. No one tried to retort.

“If everyone would gather in that corner, please.”

Two of the men moved at Elvar’s command with their submachine guns held at waist-level. In the meantime, the rest of the men followed Laurie’s instructions and moved their friend’s body to another corner, clasping his hands in front of his chest and putting a handkerchief over his face. They then placed the fake camera where they had stored the guns next to him.

Fiona and the others did as they were told, and moved to a corner far from the door and sat down. Along the way, one servant placed a cloth over the face of the dead old man.

“Enough. Move.”

The servants did not try to hide their hostility even as they faced down the guns, but they followed orders and quietly sat on the floor.

“My, my. Did that give you a scare, sweetheart?” Benedict asked in Bezelese as he walked over to Fiona and patted her head.

“No,” Fiona replied bitterly.

Benedict shrugged when his joke fell flat. “Anyway, excellent choice telling everyone not to resist,” he whispered. Then he turned to the three men holding everyone hostage and the rest of the attackers who were whispering behind them, and said in Roxchean, “Ahem. Everyone?”

Elvar turned in the midst of talking to another man.

“Yes, Mr. Carr?”

His attitude was unchanged from before.

“So you’re used to this work, old man,” Benedict muttered in Bezelese and shrugged. Fiona stared at him, surprised.

Benedict made a point of raising his voice. “We may be hostages, but you will take questions, yes?”

“It would be a bother if everyone spoke at once, but we are willing to answer questions from you or the queen.”

“Thank you. I’ve been wondering—” Benedict slowly put his hand into a fallen paper bag. Then he tossed a handful of confetti into the air. “—is the shoot finished?”

Elvar did not smile.

“Yes. We’ve got more important things to do.”

“I see. I would be happy if you would do them somewhere else.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. We need the queen’s cooperation for this little venture of ours.” Then, Elvar turned to the men. “Go.”

Three men took up submachine guns, stuffed extra magazines into their suit pockets, and left the hall.

“Everyone in the villa should be in this room and we doubt anyone will be coming until morning, but we will be searching the building just in case. Your understanding, please.”

“Even if you find someone, I won’t tolerate any attacks on people who don’t resist,” Fiona said firmly from beside Benedict.

“Believe me, Queen Francesca. It’ll be better for us as well if no one resists,” Elvar replied, and handed his submachine gun to the man behind him. Then he took up a 9mm automatic handgun and expertly loaded it. He cocked the gun, armed the safety, and stuck it in his belt.

“Anyway, this is a very large-scale operation for you to take the queen hostage and take over the villa with your numbers. You are all right for now, but won’t there be a big commotion soon?” asked Benedict.

“Not to worry,” Elvar replied.

“I’m bored,” Allison grumbled as she finished off yet another cup of tea in the open-air cafe.

After the fireworks display at the very beginning of the year, which had filled the sky but was mostly hidden by the snow, the city was still bustling with excitement.

The snow fell seemingly without end. There was a thick layer atop the parasol. Sometimes snow quietly slid off the edges and onto the ground.

Allison handed a coin to a waiter in full winter getup and ordered the same tea as before.

“Why can’t it be morning soon? Or why can’t something interesting happen?”

As if on cue, a siren began wailing in the distance. It grew louder and closer in time, and people turned before they noticed the bright red light and made way.

Soon, a small fire truck passed by Allison and disappeared further down the street.

“Nothing to do with me...” Allison mumbled, sipping her new cup of tea. But at that moment,

“Fire!” someone cried from behind her.

“Hm?”

Allison turned to see black smoke rising from behind the cafe. The waiters shouted as they fumbled through the snow.

“It’s the back alley! Someone call the fire department!”

“A truck just passed by!”

“Someone call them!”

“Hey, where’s the nearest telephone?!”

Some began to wonder if they should evacuate the customers or wait to see how bad the fire was.

As Allison took another lazy sip of tea, she spotted someone.

“Huh?”

The man was in his thirties and dressed in local clothing. There was a rucksack on his back.

The man stepped out of the back alley and was walking in the opposite direction as the murmuring crowds. His head was slightly bowed and his hat was pressed firmly over his head.

Allison stood, leaving more than half her tea unfinished, and followed the man. Onlookers were rushing to the scene but the man alone was leaving it.

After following the man about 20 meters, Allison ran into a young police officer rushing to the scene of the fire. And she did not miss the man turning his head when the officer passed by.

“Wait—”

Allison spread her arms to stop the officer.

“It’s dangerous, Miss. Please let me pass—”

“Never mind. Come with me.”

She grabbed him by the collar and began to walk. The name tag on his chest—‘Piazza’—was on the verge of tearing. The truncheon at his side swung back and forth.

“What are you doing? Are you drunk? I’ll have you arrested for assaulting a police officer!” Officer Piazza threatened as he was dragged away.

“I’m not drunk, FYI. Just follow me. If my hunch is right, you might have to arrest that man.”

“Huh?”

Allison stopped for a moment, giving Piazza the chance to behold her face. His tone changed in an instant.

“Oh.”

And he put on the most dashing look he could think of—which ended up being closer to an awkward gape.

“What is it? How can I help—”

“Be quiet and follow me.”

“Of course!”

Allison and Officer Piazza followed the man a further 10 meters.

As they watched, the man stepped into another alley. Allison quickly went over and poked her head inside, watching the man disappear. Officer Piazza did the same.

“So...who is that man?”

“He’s suspicious. I saw him practically running away from the fire without so much as looking back.”

They heard another siren wailing in the distance. The man turned right into another alleyway. Allison quickly ran after him, treading over the snow, and to the corner.

“What is this?” Officer Piazza asked as he came after her.

“Hey! What’s he doing?”

Ten meters ahead of them in a deserted stretch of the alley stood the man. There was a grim look on his face as he poured out the contents of a bottle onto several crates stacked under a roof.

The man emptied two small bottles before putting them back into his rucksack. Then he stepped back and took out a pack of matches.

“Stop! Arsonist!” Allison shouted as she stepped into the alley.

“Agh!”

The man flinched almost comically as he dropped his half-open pack of matches. Countless matches scattered over the snow.

“Hey! You’re under arrest for attempted arson!”

And the moment Officer Piazza appeared, the man’s terror peaked.

“Gah!”

He quickly turned and fled further down the alley. But the second Officer Piazza stepped forward, the man slipped on the snow and fell.

Before the man could stand, Officer Piazza climbed onto his back. He pressed him against the ground and took one hand off of him to reach for a pair of heavy handcuffs.

“Argh!”

But the restrained man flailed like a child and ended up poking Officer Piazza in the eye.

“Urgh!” Officer Piazza flinched reflexively. The man saw his chance and grabbed the lid of a wooden crate.

“Graaaaah!”

His desperate swing hit Officer Piazza square in the side of the head. His hat went flying.

“Urgh!” Officer Piazza screamed again, holding his head in his hands.

“Oh dear,” Allison mumbled. The man had taken to his feet and was running off. Only then did he notice her standing in his way.

“Move!”

Allison stepped aside without a word.

“Heh.”

The man smirked and continued. But the moment he passed by Allison—

“Allison Elbow.”

She stuck out her right foot and placed her left hand on her right fist. Then she stuck out her right shoulder and right elbow. Her long golden hair danced.

The elbow hit the distracted man in the forehead.

“Gah!”

The man howled as he fell back. He flew into the air for half a second before landing back-first on the paved, snow-covered ground and hitting his head. Then resounded a sound somewhere between a ‘thud’ and a ‘bang’.

“Oh? It actually worked,” Allison mumbled to herself.

Then she walked over to the snow-covered man writhing on the ground.

“Damn this guy...” Officer Piazza came over with watery eyes and bent the man’s arms backwards, finally snapping handcuffs on him. “And I’ll be adding an obstruction of justice charge on top of that!”

Allison muttered quietly as she watched, “Looks like I managed to kill some time.”

“Not to worry,” Elvar said.

Laurie came up from behind him, wiping her face with a handkerchief. “You should be worrying about yourselves.”

Fiona stared straight up at Laurie. Laurie met her gaze.

“Of course. And now you have ruined our party. What do you plan to do next?” Benedict said snidely. Laurie did not smile.

“I have questions for the queen. We’ll be taking you two to a different room.”

Fiona stood. Then she looked at Laurie, who was just about her own height.

“Fine. But—”

“You’re in no position to negotiate.”

“—I’ll never forgive you if you harm the people here.”

“I don’t need your forgiveness.”

As the women glared daggers at one another, Benedict slowly got to his feet. “Anyway, it seems we must do as we are told.”

Elvar said from behind Laurie, “We will not kill anyone who does not resist.”

“...I understand,” Fiona replied, and turned, “But first, let my subject’s body rest somewhere else.”

Laurie did not answer. Elvar spoke instead.

“We’ll let two of the women move him.”

Laurie snorted, but she did not stop him.

“Thank you,” Fiona replied, and walked over to the servants, “We need two people. Please.”

Four of the servants gathered at the back of the room hesitantly stood. For a minute each woman tried to yield to another, but in the end two middle-aged women came forward to take the body.

The women exchanged glances and nodded, then went to the corpse.

Elvar gave orders to watch the two women. Kirk held his submachine gun at waist level and kept his eyes on them from a distance.

Once the women were beside the bloodied old man, Benedict said, “Please use the curtain.”

The women detached a beige curtain from the window. They spread it over the floor, carried the body onto it, and then rolled it up. The old man had bled out completely—blood did not smear the curtain.

It was just then, as everyone waited for the women to move the body.

One of the two—a plump woman wearing a green apron—suddenly lifted the body on her own. The moment the other woman opened her mouth in shock, the plump woman shouted.

“You! That’s right! You foolish young lady!”

Kirk was flabbergasted; Fiona and Benedict gasped.

“...Are you talking to me?” Laurie turned with a frigid glare.

“Who else would I be talking to?” the woman taunted, holding the body in her arms, “I don’t know what these men are thinking, working for a little girl like you, but let me tell you—I’ve never once seen an idiot’s plan work out! And I’ve never seen a worse idiot than you!”

“Oh?”

Laurie seethed.

“Leader. Don’t let her provoke you,” Elvar advised. But Laurie ignored him and slowly walked over to Kirk.

“You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that,” she said and held out her hand toward Kirk, “Give it here.”

Kirk paused for a moment, but he armed the safety and handed her the submachine gun. “It’s loaded, Leader.”

As soon as Laurie received the submachine gun, she disarmed the safety and toggled it to ‘SINGLE SHOT’. With her left hand she gripped the magazine and raised it in front of her face, taking aim precisely at the woman 3 meters in front of her.

“Wh-what are you doing?” The woman flinched, reflexively backing away. But she only took four steps before her back hit the window. The other middle-aged woman scurried aside in fear.

“And you’ve got quite the mouth on you.”

“Nothing wrong with calling an idiot and idiot, I assure you!”

“Defiant to the end.”

Laurie pulled the trigger. A shell casing leapt out of the gun. The bullet hit the wooden frame about 30 centimeters from the woman’s face.

“Enough!” Fiona cried. Benedict grabbed her so she would not bolt towards the servant.

The plump woman glared at Laurie.

“I’ll let you live if you beg for your life. I don’t want to waste any bullets.”

“Don’t be absurd! I would never stoop to begging a foolish villain like you! I’d like to see the face of the brainless parents who raised you!” the woman cried.

Laurie’s eyes narrowed. She set the gun from ‘SINGLE SHOT’ to ‘SAFETY’ to ‘CONTINUOUS FIRE’.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Die.”

She pulled the trigger, fighting the recoil with one hand. The bullets drove themselves into the woman’s body as she clutched the corpse.

“Gyaaagh!”

The gunfire was practically one with the woman’s scream. The sound of shattering glass resounded in the hall.

Blood spewing from every part of her body, the woman and the corpse she held fell out the window. At the same time, the submachine gun ran out of ammo and went silent.

The scream outside the window stopped with a thud.

Silence returned to the room. The snow and the icy wind blasted the room. What little was left of the glass fell from the frame and shattered against the floor.

“Hmph. She had it coming.” Laurie lowered her gun. “It’s out of ammo.” She gave it to Kirk with one hand. Kirk took the gun without a word, switched magazines, and checked outside with a flashlight.

The villa was positioned atop a hill. In other words, the second floor in the villa was about as high up as the third floor of a normal building. It was almost 10 meters from the snow-covered ground. Below were two figures, one atop the other, staining the snow red. Snow was piling on top of them.

With snow on his head Kirk pulled himself back inside. And he turned to Laurie, shaking his head.

Laurie looked at Fiona.

And she put on a friendly smile as she faced the queen’s glare.

“What’s wrong, Queen Francesca? Anything you’d like to say?”

“You’re an—”

“I thought I said I wouldn’t kill anyone who didn’t resist. I don’t think your servants are as disciplined as you think they are. Now we’ve taken care of all the corpses; sorry we had to break your window, too. I’ll make sure to cover the costs sometime.”

“Do people’s lives mean *nothing* to you?”

Laurie cast a glance at the body of her friend in the corner of the room. "They do."
"Then—"

"It depends on *who*!" she cried, cutting off Fiona, "That woman's life must have been important to you! But it was *nothing* to me! Just like the lives of my men mean nothing to you! Am I wrong?! You are selfish people, just like me! And that's fine; what really disgusts me is your holier-than-thou attitude! It's sickening!" Laurie cried in a single breath.

The men did not try to stop her. They did not even encourage her. The men in black simply stood there like backdrop.

"This is *war*, Queen Francesca. *War*! Ahaha! That's right! A wonderful time when we murder one another's loved ones; a time when the precious lives of those around us become cheaper than month-old vegetables!"

Fiona's shoulders trembled in rage. Benedict hauled her back.

"Oh!"

He caught her just before she fell, and sat her down on the floor.

Fiona stared. "Why did you do that?"

"Please, wait," Benedict replied, and looked up at Laurie as she calmed herself. "Er... may I say something?"

"What? Say it."

"Thank you. We do not want any more people to die. We will scold the servants so they will not fight back, so please finish your business quickly."

"For once, we're in agreement," Laurie said snidely.

"Also, if we leave the broken windows as they are, this room will soon become cold and snow will come inside. It would be good to at least block it. Should I?"

"We'll be taking care of that."

Laurie went to the men at the center of the room and ordered them to block the window with another curtain. The men moved quickly to get their job done.

"Here."

They stuck the curtain to the walls with the adhesive tape they used to pack their equipment. It was a new product from the big city, which Benedict noted. "I see you have something very useful."

"We'll give you a demonstration later on your hands and feet. We don't have much in the way of rope, you see," Elvar replied.

Benedict shrugged. "Was that part of the adhesive tape manual?"

Elvar shook his head. "No. But I guarantee you it'll become standard use in the future. The police might come knocking at your door just for buying a roll."

At that moment,

"We're back."

Two of the men who had been sent to search the villa returned, announcing themselves loudly to avoid being mistaken for hostiles. They turned to Elvar.

"We've checked all the rooms and found no one. Wayne's watching the doors."

Elvar thanked them and replied to their questions about the gunfire they heard.

"The Leader killed a resisting servant. That is all."

Laurie returned to Benedict and Fiona, a glass of water in hand. She drained it. “Now, Queen Francesca and the Hero of the Mural. It’s questioning time. Follow me.” Then she added, “The senior citizens can stay here.”

She cast aside the glass without even looking where it went.

The glass hit one of the wooden plates decorating the walls in a line—the one depicting a hawk with its wings spread—and shattered.

“Let’s go.”

Fiona stood without a word. And she gently let go of the hand of an elderly woman who tried to hold on to the last moment.

“Please don’t worry about us. Just watch over the others. I don’t want any more people to die.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the woman nodded firmly. Fiona turned to Laurie. “Where shall we go, then? I could make you some tea if you’d prefer my room.”

“I don’t need any of your poisoned tea. Let’s go.”

Fiona and Benedict began walking, side-by-side.

And they left the room surrounded by men in submachine guns, looking almost like they were being protected.

* * *

Next to the villa foundation, on a gentle slope covered with snow.

Two people were buried there.

One was wrapped in a large piece of beige cloth stained with droplets of dark red blood.

The other was lying on top of him. A plump, middle-aged woman wearing a green apron. Her clothes were also stained with blood. Her graying black hair, earlier tied in a neat bun, was completely disheveled.

Snow came down endlessly, covering the bloodcurdling sight.

Several minutes later, by the time a beige curtain firmly covered the broken window from which the two people had fallen, the two bodies were completely covered and impossible to find in the snow.

The mound of snow moved.

The mound covering the two people, bulging just a little higher than the others, slowly stirred.

Something squirmed under the snow. It seemed to be trying to get away from the building, quietly but steadily crawling away from the light seeping from the windows. The snow over it seemed to ripple like water.

Eventually, by the time the shape reached the base of a large tree and was swallowed by darkness—

A human face emerged from the snow.

It was the middle-aged woman who had fallen from the window. Her hair was drenched and clung all over her face. A thin stream of blood ran down her right earlobe. Her left cheek was torn apart, exposing the flesh.

Her arms were also bloodied, and the fingers of her left hand were splayed in odd directions. Blood also spilled from her thighs and left knee, soaking her clothing.

“Phew...”

The moment she exhaled, she coughed up massive amounts of blood.

“Koff!”

The blood melted the snow under it and dyed the ground red. But there was a glint of life in the woman’s eyes.

“Don’t make me laugh, little girl... Prince Treize will set things right...”

The woman muttered to herself as she slowly moved through the pitch-black darkness.

The snow came up to her waist. She swung her arms back and forth, wading her way through.

Chapter 4: Counterattack

“Are you in, Elder Sister?”

“Yes. Come in.”

“Please excuse my intrusion. ...Oh my, Elder Sister! That dress looks splendid on you!”

“Thank you, Meriel. Your dress is wonderful, too.”

“Thank you, Elder Sister. I am very pleased to hear that. But I’m not certain I will be able to stand wearing this dress all evening.”

“Don’t worry. Everyone changes after the dinner banquet. There’s even time set aside for it.”

“I am relieved to hear that. Will the festivities for the new year’s countdown begin soon?”

“Yes. It’s a beautiful time of year that enlivens all of Sfrestus. And now I’ll have the chance to greet the new year with a friend near my age for the very first time.”

“I will visit again next year, Elder Sister, if you would kindly invite me. I promised earlier that I would bring Treize, but I shall do my very best and ask Mother if the entire family could visit!”

“That sounds wonderful! Father and Mother have also said that they would like to meet Sir Carr Benedict, Hero of the Mural, again.”

“Then that will be the first thing I ask my family when I return to Ikstova.”

“Thank you, Meriel. Shall we be off now? Perhaps by this time next year, I will be with both you and Treize. I can’t wait.”

“Of course, Elder Sister. But please remember that Treize is a numbskull.”

“A ‘numbskull’?”

“Ah! Pardon me, Elder Sister. I’ve used a very crude word. It is Roxchean for ‘fool’.”

“Oh my. ‘Treize the Numbskull’...? That’s a rather funny name.”

“I feel a little guilty for saying this after coining that name myself, but I don’t feel it is a good idea to call him that...”

* * *

Meriel and her ‘Elder Sister’ chattered in Sfrestus, the capital of Sou Be-Il.

At the same time, it had been several dozen minutes since the year 3306 began in the kingdom of Iks.

“Man, I’m bored. Are we supposed to sit around like this until morning?” Lillia grumbled from her seat on the carpet in front of the fireplace.

“Apologies, Milady. There’s nothing around here.”

Treize the Numbskull bowed his head from the sofa.

All Lillia had done since the start of the year was drink two cups of tea and tend to the fire in the red-brick fireplace. She was bored of even that, tossing in pieces of wood when she felt like it.

“As your host tonight, I would like to offer you my sincerest apologies. The snow is just too much...”

“Snow again! I don’t believe this!”

“Of course! I’m very sorry!”

“Man... It’s really coming down, isn’t it?” Lillia sighed, glancing outside. The large window behind Treize was half-covered by the snow on the windowsill.

“Maybe I should tell you about Ikstova?” asked Treize.

“Sure. Not like we have anything else to do,” Lillia replied. Treize cleared his throat.

“During winter in Ikstova, the weather tends to change rapidly. You’ll get huge snowflakes out of nowhere, then it’ll stop just as suddenly and the sky’ll be full of stars.”

“Huh.”

“So it’s dangerous to go outside if you’re not prepared. That’s why everyone here takes the necessary equipment when they go out—that way, if they’re caught in a blizzard, they could dig themselves a hole for shelter to wait out the storm.”

“Right.”

“And we actually have a lot of dangerous animals around, too. Wolves are common in the valleys. They almost never attack humans, but being around livestock can be risky. We also have bears. They usually hibernate over the winter, but the ones who didn’t find enough food to fall asleep or the ones that woke up are extremely dangerous. In the worst case scenario, they can even come into human settlements. Last year, we switched out all the fences around garbage collection zones to metal ones.”

“Oh yeah. Mom used to tell me never to wander into the mountains when I was little.”

“Although...you’d have been safe if you were in that valley.”

“Why?”

“Oh, er...because there’s barbed wire all around the woods there.”

“Huh.”

“There are bears in this area, too. So it’s a very bad idea to try and come without a car. That goes for leaving, too.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t ever plan to trek dozens of kilometers on foot to Kunst. But what if a bear attacks the cottage? Those glass windows aren’t gonna last.”

“Things like that happen sometimes. They smell food inside and ransack houses.”

“Then aren’t we in danger here?”

“It’ll be fine. Every residence in Ikstova is bound to have a hunting rifle or two. You can chase off most bears with the sound of gunfire alone.”

“Uh huh.”

The conversation ended less than five minutes after it began.

“Ugh...” Lillia sighed.

Treize shut his eyes. He was still for several seconds, as though he were asleep.

Then, he opened his eyes and put his left hand—balled into a fist—over the golden pendant on his chest. He tapped it several times, then spoke.

“Lillia.”

“Hm?”

Lillia turned, taken aback. Treize was the picture of gravity.

“What’s with the serious look?”

“I, er...I was thinking about the things I *haven’t* talked about.”

“And?”

“And I realized I haven’t told you about my family. I thought it was about time I told you.”

Lillia’s curiosity was piqued. “All right.”

“R-really?” Treize gasped.

“Yeah. I also wanna know how you learned to fly aeroplanes, how you speak Bezelese, and how you know Mom.”

“Huh? Oh, er... I was going to tell you one of these days...or before that—like this summer, but I never got the chance.”

“Is it that heavy? Also, it’s *last* summer now.”

“R-right. Last summer. I...well, I think this might surprise you. You might not believe me.”

“Now this is getting interesting.” Lillia turned not just her head, but her entire body. She looked at Treize from in front of the fireplace. “Talk.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you.”

His decision made, Treize placed his hand over his chest again and took a deep breath.

“I’m—”

“EEEEEEEEEEK!”

Treize was only a word into his confession before it was buried by Lillia’s scream.

“Whoa!”

He flinched. Lillia, her eyes the size of dinner plates, pointed at something behind and a little above Treize.

“Treize! Behind you! Look!”

“What?”

He turned.

“WHOA!”

He froze. A blood-covered woman was clinging to the large window.

Her mouth was stained red. Her face was partly shredded, bare flesh exposed to the air. Soaking-wet black hair clung to her cheeks and forehead. Her ragged dress was drenched below the waist and dotted with blood. Her bloodshot eyes were staring straight at Lillia and Treize. The moment she opened her mouth to speak, blood spewed out.

“Eek!” Lillia trembled.

“Wh-what’s going on...?”

Treize stood and took a defensive stance.

The woman shook the window. The glass did not break, but she made a loud racket. The snow on the windowsill fell away.

“...Huh? Auntie?”

Treize finally realized that he knew the bloodied face.

“Auntie!”

He ran to the window and unlocked it. Then he slightly pushed open the window and yelled.

“Stand back, Auntie!”

The woman staggered backwards. Treize opened the window fully. The woman leaned against the windowsill as though falling, then used the last of her strength to crawl inside. Treize quickly dragged his sofa over to the window.

“Uaaaagh...”

The woman made a noise—something between a scream and a sigh—and fell onto the sofa. Treize shut the window and turned to her.

“What happened, Auntie? What’s going on?”

Lillia finally realized that the stranger was injured; she quickly rose and hesitantly looked over her. “A-are you all right?”

“Uaaaagh... Hah! Koff...”

Bloodied and drenched, the woman made a horrifying sound as she lay on the sofa and exhaled raggedly. Then—

“Highness... Treize...”

“Yeah! It’s me! I’m here!” Treize replied loudly, kneeling by the sofa.

“Hey, she looks really bad! I don’t think she should be talking!” Lillia suggested, but Treize ignored her.

“What’s wrong, Auntie? What’s happened?”

The woman gasped, “Villa...intruders...everyone...hostage...”

“What? Intruders? ...You mean the new year’s guests?”

“Yes...we got...one...but they’ll...interrogate...Majesty...”

Treize leaned in close to the woman’s ear so Lillia could not hear.

“Someone took care of one of the intruders, you mean? And the bastards are going to interrogate Mother and Father?”

“Yes...wanted...to know...”

“All right, I get what you’re saying! I’m going to do something about this, I promise! Thank you for coming to tell me, Auntie! Thank you! You’ve done a great job! Thank you!”

“Highness...it was...no-”

Her words cut off. The woman seemed to snort as she exhaled, and with her eyes wide open she stopped moving completely.

“T-T-T-Treize! This isn’t good, she’s not going to make it! We have to get a doctor, quick!”

“Yeah...but...”

He looked into the woman’s eyes. They did not move. He put his fingers onto her bloodied neck and waited.

“...Thank you, Auntie... I mean it,” he mumbled, and with his left hand closed the woman’s eyes.

“T-Treize?”

“It’s no use. She...just passed away.”

“Why? Who did this to her? Was it a bear? That must be it! Maybe she was wandering the woods and a bear attacked her?” Lillia asked, staring at Treize’s back.

“No. It’s safe here. Don’t worry,” he replied. “Damn it...”

Treize rose and ran to the telephone. But the moment he picked up the receiver and reached for the dial, his expression changed.

“Shit!”

There was an impact as he slammed the receiver onto the phone.

“What’s wrong, Treize?”

“The line’s been cut!”

“What? How?”

The phone line at the villa had been severed, rendering the internal line at the cottage useless.

Treize did not answer; instead, he turned and opened the living room door and ran to the front door.

“W-Wait!”

Lillia and the woman’s body were left alone in the living room.

Quietly and hesitantly, Lillia cast a solemn glance at the body. Blood and water were soaking into the sofa.

“Er...I don’t know who you are, but please rest in peace,” she said, clasping her hands over her chest and closing her eyes. She held a long moment of silence.

Then, Lillia opened her eyes.

“Treize, you imbecile...you better not have gone off somewhere by yourself...”

About two minutes of quiet waiting later,

“Shit!”

Treize swore as he opened the door and ran back into the living room.

His arms were completely full, and there were things on his back as well.

“Damn it! Don’t screw with me!”

Treize haphazardly laid the things down on the carpet and angrily began to equip them.

He had brought an assortment of outdoor gear for winter use. Long snow boots, snowshoes, a canvas knapsack, a metallic water bottle, gloves, goggles, a mask, a flashlight, and a signal flare.

Then came the combat gear—a bolt-action rifle complete with scope, along with a wooden box full of ammunition.

Quickly, Treize prepared himself. He put on his utility belt over his clothes, strapped on his holster, loaded his rifle, switched to snow boots, and put on a jacket and a hat. He stuffed the rest into the knapsack, hung the snowshoes from it, threw on the knapsack, then slung his rifle over his right shoulder.

“All set!” he said, getting to his feet.

“‘All set’, my butt!” Lillia cried indignantly, “Lillia Smash!”

“Ack!”

She smacked Treize in the back of the head. His hat flew off and landed on the carpet.

Treize turned, fully equipped for battle.

“What was that all about?”

“That’s my line! You just listened to this lady by yourself, jumped to conclusions by yourself, and started getting ready by yourself. I want an explanation!”

“Th-there’s no time!”

“So make it quick!” Lillia argued, silencing Treize. “Who is this lady? It looks like someone shot her! You’d better tell me what’s going on and what you’re going to do—all of it!”

Treize was silent.

“Now!”

“...All right, I’ll tell you. I’ll explain. And you should tell someone what happened, too, just in case. In case something happens to me,” Treize said gravely.

Lillia hung her head. “This would’ve sounded like a bad joke if it weren’t for the body...”

“Yeah.”

“Talk.”

“Yeah.”

Treize took several calming breaths.

Then he thought about how much he should tell Lillia.

“If you head toward the lake from here, over one mountain—no, hill—you’ll reach the royal family’s property and their villa. I think something’s happened there. This lady works in the palace for the royal family—for the queen—and we happen to know each other.”

“...Go on.”

“This is what she told me before she passed away. The guests for this year’s new year’s eve party have taken the queen, her husband, and the servants hostage. They’re up to something at the villa, where no one is going to go until morning.”

“...That’s...” Lillia stared for a moment, mouth agape. “...That’s terrorism! Against the queen! Isn’t this really bad?!”

“Which is why I’m in such a hurry. Do you understand now?”

“Yeah. Keep explaining.”

“Auntie here managed to escape somehow, and was shot in the process. And she came to this cottage, which is the nearest building to the villa.”

“I see. I get it.” Lillia nodded again and again. Then she looked Treize in the eye. “So what are you going to do, decked out like a soldier?”

“Obviously I’m going to charge in there and—”

“On your own? You’re out of your mind,” Lillia declared.

Treize could not respond. Lillia continued.

“There’s a bunch of hostage-takers, right? And they have guns, right? And you’re still going to bust in there alone and protect the queen and all the hostages so no one gets hurt, while somehow taking care of all the bad guys? It’s impossible. I guarantee it.”

“...Well... I guess...”

“Mom told me something really great once. ‘Only an idiot rushes into a battle he can’t win’.”

“Yeah. ...You’re right.”

Treize’s shoulders sagged. The knapsack and the rifle seemed much heavier now. He sank into a nearby chair.

Lillia put her hands on her hips and stared down at Treize. “So let’s think of something more realistic. Okay?”

“Yeah...” Treize replied, hanging his head.

“First, we have to report this! We’ve got to get the word out! The police? Or...wait! Doesn’t the royal family have a personal guard team?”

“Yeah, but we can’t reach them. The phone’s dead. Our only option’s to go on foot. Damn it...those people were prepared. ...The royal family always spends the end of the year at the villa, and security is lax. No one’s going to the villa until morning,” Treize said dejectedly. Lillia fell into thought.

“What about the guardhouse we passed on the way? There was a policeman there!”

“Yeah, but it’s way too far. Ten kilometers at the very least. And with this snowfall, it’ll take us at least three hours to get there. More, if we’re unlucky.” Treize shook his head.

“I see...” Lillia nodded gravely, but she remembered something. “Wait. What were you just about to do, then? Is the villa close? You said it’s over a hill, right?”

“Oh, er...” Treize looked up. “The thing is...”

He thought for a moment if he should tell the truth.

“The thing is...”

Eventually, he gave in.

“The villa’s connected to a little hut next to this cottage. The hut looks like a shelter, but it’s actually on royal property. And...there’s a tunnel in the basement that leads to a storehouse right next to the villa.”

“What? Really?”

“Really.” Treize nodded. He looked up and continued weakly, like a child admitting to a lie. “There’s a hidden basement under the storehouse by the villa. The basement’s connected to the hut outside. There’s a small railcar there that takes less than 10 minutes from one end to the other. Auntie took the railcar here, too.”

“I see. But why did the royal family install something like that?” Lillia wondered pointedly.

“Actually, it’s been around since before the villa was built. It was for transporting lumber supplies,” Treize lied. The tunnel was actually built so the royal family could go between the two buildings even in wintertime, and also to provide them with an escape route in case of an emergency.

Lillia did not doubt Treize.

“But how do you know all this, Treize?” she asked another pointed question.

“I...”

Treize hesitated, but quickly recalled the skeezy police officer he had spoken to the day before.

“I...I actually have a friend in the royal guard! I heard it from him. I want to join someday, too. Doesn’t it sound cool, protecting the queen and stuff?”

“Huh. Yeah.”

Lillia seemed to be convinced.

“So I have to do something. I’ll take the railcar to the villa—”

“—And die in a hail of bullets before you can save anyone. The end.”

Treize could not retort. He sighed. “Then what do I do? Is there any way to make this into a battle I *can* win?”

“No.”

Treize stared. Lillia continued.



“So call someone. We have to contact someone. There’s nothing else we can do.”

“I told you before, the phone’s—”

“What about at the villa?” Lillia cut him off. “Won’t we find something to contact the outside there?”

“Oh! You’re right!”

“Yes? Yes!”

“I completely forgot. If I can get to the third floor, I can get the radio in my—”

‘I can get the radio in my room’, Treize was about to say, but he caught himself before he could.

“Huh?”

“...Okay. So the villa is three stories high. The queen and her husband’s room and their daughter’s room are on the third floor.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Now, the queen and her husband love aeroplanes, so they have a radio on the third floor. We could use that to contact the air traffic controller at Kunst Airport.”

“Great! That’s a plan! ...Wait, how do you know about—”

“This is not the time!” Treize cut her off, reaching the limits of his creativity, “I’m heading to the villa! There’s nothing else we can do! There’s supposed to be eight hostage-takers. The villa’s a big place—they couldn’t possibly keep an eye on all the rooms while watching the hostages. I’m going to sneak in there somehow and get to the room with the radio.”

“All right...no objections.”

“Good!”

Treize stood from his seat and headed to the door.

“Huh?”

Then he spotted Lillia coming up behind him with her coat and hat in hand.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m coming too.”

“Why?”

“Two heads are better than one. Especially if it gets you an extra set of eyes.”

“But—”

“You’re not going to fight. You’re going to sneak in. That means I can help you! If the queen really is in danger, I can’t just sit back and do nothing! I’ll keep an eye on you so you don’t get yourself into a shootout! That is all!”

“No, but...” Treize began, but he trailed off. “...All right.”

“And leave the rifle!”

“What? I can’t—”

“It’ll get in the way! How’re you going to sneak through the villa with that thing on your back?”

“What if they catch us?”

“Then you surrender! We went over this, Treize; they’d kill you in a straight fight. You fire off one shot, and they’ll be on you like a pack of wolves.”

“...All right. Then I’ll leave it in the storehouse once we get to the other side.”

"I guess that works. ...Let's go!"

With that, Lillia put on her coat and her hat. Then she headed for the doors to put on her boots. Treize followed after her.

"You know what? Maybe you should stay behind after all—"

"You would have died this summer if I wasn't there!"

"True... Also, it's *last* summer now."

"I'm not gonna let a guy who can't even swim go off by himself."

"I practiced a lot after that, you know. Now I can go a few kilometers—"

"Shut up!"

They geared up for the weather and stepped outside.

Left alone in the living room was the servant's body.

* * *

"You bastard! You've got a lot of nerve to be setting fires on the first day of the new year!"

Officer Piazza was hopping mad.

"Now, now. There's no need to be raising your voice like that."

Quietly chiding him was another police officer, this one in his sixties.

In the center of the small white room was a table. The arsonist was handcuffed to a corner of the table, sitting with his head bowed.

Standing behind the arsonist was a red-eared Officer Piazza, who was holding a truncheon. Across from the arsonist sat an old, white-haired officer. Because they were inside, he wore a suit instead of a uniform and was not wearing his hat.

They were in a questioning room at the Kunst police department. The table and the chairs were bolted to the floor to prevent them from being used as weapons.

"Won't you at least tell us your name?" the older policeman asked gently. Over his breast was embroidered the name 'Warren'.

"C'mon, fess up!" Officer Piazza demanded, "You have any idea who you're dealing with here? This is Rein Warren, chief of police and a member of the royal guard! He'd never normally deal with a petty criminal like you; you should be honored that everyone else was too busy for the questioning—"

"That's more than enough, Officer," Warren ordered.

"Urk! Yes, sir!" Officer Piazza replied, standing up straight. Warren tut-tutted and shook his head before turning to the arsonist once more.

"I can't exactly speak with you if you won't give me your name. Even a temporary nickname will do for now. Won't you tell us?"

The man said nothing. He was not even looking at Warren.

Warren paused, then spoke again.

"Now, about the places you set on fire..."

The man twitched.

"No deaths, and the only injured are members of the fire department. It's certainly a relief, isn't it?"

“H-how is that a relief, sir?” asked Officer Piazza.

“It’s very much a relief,” Warren replied, “Arson causing death is a serious crime. This man could have been sentenced to death if someone had been killed.”

The man said nothing.

“Now, depending on the case, we can overlook charges of assaulting a police officer.”

“Huh? But chief!” Piazza raised his voice. But the man still remained silent.

Warren ignored Piazza’s protests. “In any case, I suggest you get some rest. Calm down. And feel free to call for me when you decide you’d like to talk. And naturally, you also have the right to remain silent until you’ve consulted a lawyer in the morning.”

Warren stood and opened the door behind him. Outside was the hallway. He thanked the officer who was waiting there.

“You keep an eye on him, now. Call for me if anything happens,” he said, “Officer Piazza? Come with me.”

“I—”

“Now, now, Officer. Let’s go greet the brave woman who assisted us.”

“Yes, sir!” Piazza cried with a salute. He gave the guarding officer a nod and followed Warren out, heading down the long hallway.

After they passed one or two cells—

“Sir, shouldn’t we have gone a bit tougher on him?”

“No; he’s not like to confess anything at the moment. I was just prodding to see what I could get. Times like this, it’s best to give him some time. I doubt he’ll say a word to the guard. So for the next few hours, he’ll be alone and afraid, not knowing what will happen to him. Then I’ll visit him again and strike up a normal conversation—one that has nothing to do with the case.”

“By that...you mean small talk? Nothing about the fires?”

“Exactly. Even if it doesn’t seem meaningful in the least. The important thing here is to rid the suspect of his reluctance to talk to the investigators. It doesn’t matter what you talk about. And it doesn’t matter if either of you get angry sometimes. As long as you keep a conversation going, like a game of catch, you’ll draw out all the answers you need. The point is to pop the important questions when he doesn’t expect it. Then he won’t be able to retreat to silence; that’s when we get the answers.”

“I see... It looks like I still have a long way to go, chief.”

“In any case, Officer Piazza. What is your evaluation of our suspect?”

“Well...I guess he must have wanted to make some noise, considering the day he pulled this stunt. Or maybe he was really lonely because he didn’t have anyone to spend today with.”

“Hmm.”

Warren nodded dubiously and entered a room labeled ‘RECEPTION’.

Two sofas were arranged in the room. Allison sat on one of them, sipping tea. She tried to stand when she saw Warren enter the room, but he stopped her.

“Please, no need for formalities.”

Warren and Piazza sat across from her.

“Ms. Schultz, yes? I’m terribly sorry you had to see such a shameful sight while on vacation here.”

Allison grinned, unconcerned. “Not at all. I was just getting bored since I lost my company. Thanks to you, I even got some exercise.”

“By that, I guess you were here with your...boyfriend? What am I saying, of course a beauty like you has a boyfriend!” Piazza rambled.

“That’s more than enough, Officer,” Warren ordered.

“Urk! Yes, sir!” Piazza replied in a repeat of their earlier exchange.

“No, no. I’m here with my daughter.”

Piazza positively beamed when Allison began, but he hung his head the moment she finished.

“Have you found out anything?” asked Allison. Warren slowly shook his head.

“Not yet, ma’am. But we’ll know soon. He doesn’t seem to be a local. From the looks of him I’d wager he’s from the countryside, here to make some money. And I don’t suspect his intentions were necessarily to set fire to the city.”

“More likely he was forced to do it for money.”

“Hm? Yes, that was my guess. Why do you suppose so, Ms. Schultz?”

“If he just wanted to burn down Kunst, there would be no point in doing it on the night of a celebration, when the police and the crowds are out in full force. And if he were doing this for entertainment, he would have looked much happier in the act. But he was clearly desperate and calm. It’s likely that he was given a large sum of money to cause these fires tonight,” Allison said without even pausing to think.

“Ah.” Officer Piazza nodded, impressed.

“My assumptions exactly. I’m amazed,” said Warren, “Ah, it looks like I haven’t introduced myself yet. Police Chief Rein Warren, at your service. I’m the oldest member on the force.”

Allison’s eyes turned to dinner plates.

“No way... Captain Warren?”

“Chief of police, actually. Just under the dire-” Piazza began, but Allison cut him off.

“Oh, excuse me. You were a captain 18 years ago, right? Stabbed by Nichto on the balcony?”

“Ah!” Warren gasped, surprised in turn. “Yes, that would be me. But how—”

“Heh,” Allison smiled as she dove into her memories.

Officer Piazza stared, transfixed.

“At the time,” she said, “I was a child soldier in the Confederation Air Force. Oh, I’m still in the Air Force, for your information.”

Warren nodded. “I see. I remember there was a joint training session on the lake at the time. Where the airport stands today.”

“Yes.”

In reality, Allison had been flying over Kunst on a fighter plane at the very moment, but she nodded anyway.

“I heard it all over the radio. How Queen Francesca returned from the dead, how the Hero of the Mural saved the day, and how you made that courageous statement. And how the bad guy died. The moment you stepped forward, I yelled out loud: ‘Awesome, Captain! We have a witness!’ I also remember how you were injured in the line of duty.”

“Please. It was a shameful moment.” Warren chuckled bitterly.

Officer Piazza, who happened to have been two years old at the time, could not join the conversation.

“I failed to prevent Nichto’s suicide, and I failed to protect Her Majesty’s family... I am ashamed to remember.”

Allison gave him a gentle smile. “But didn’t Queen Francesca choose to turn her attention to governing Iks rather than hunting down the criminals before the statute of limitations expires?” Fiona had told Allison this in person, but Allison decided to emphasize her lack of connection to the queen. “That’s what I heard in passing. Is it true?”

“Well, yes. ...But it would be a lie to say I wasn’t frustrated,” said Warren, “Her Majesty can be too forgiving sometimes. Nichto’s family might have known something, but she kept her promise to the man. After a simple questioning session she sent the family to the Capital District.”

“Did he have parents or children here?” asked Allison. Warren nodded.

“Yes. A wife and a young daughter—the girl was about six years old at the time, I believe. They were living in the suburbs of Kunst, but considering their family’s infamy it would have been difficult for them to remain here.”

“I see...do you know where they are now?”

Warren shook his head.

“No. I’m afraid not. ...But they are not responsible for Owen Nichto’s crimes. I only hope they are living in peace somewhere.”

* * *

“It’s like this snow is never going to stop. We’re in for a very long night, Queen Francesca.” Laurie smirked, looking out the window.

She looked happy. She looked positively giddy.

The hostage-takers, including Laurie, were dressed from head to toe in tightly woven wool combat gear. Khaki pants and long-sleeved jackets with many pockets—it was a full set of winter gear from the Confederation Army, which any civilian could obtain when the military cleared out old equipment. On the belts were holsters containing handguns and magazines, and small pouches.

There was a revolver in Laurie’s holster as well. She had switched to short winter boots. One of her men was burning the clothes they had been wearing before in a fireplace.

The room was a small one compared to the party hall, but it was still about the size of an average living room. There was a coat hanger on the wall, and a wooden shelf was fixed to the opposite wall. There were few windows and only a single door, making it a very poor bedroom. This space was normally used for storage and as a guest waiting room.

The black boxes Laurie’s men had brought were stacked in a corner. They were all empty; all the weapons and gear hidden in their fake filming equipment were now in the hands of the hostage-takers.

In the center of the room was a long table and several chairs.

Fiona sat in one of them, glaring at the back of Laurie's head from across the table. She wore a light jacket because the room was a little chilly. To her right, 2 meters away, sat Benedict. His hands were bound together over his lap with tape.

Behind them stood Elvar and the man named Kirk, submachine guns at the ready.

A radio was strapped around Elvar's waist like a belt for ease of communication. The wires from the radio and the battery were connected to the earpiece in his left ear and the microphone near his throat.

"We kept you waiting while we changed and cut the telephone lines."

Laurie smiled as she turned, taking a seat a short distance from the table. She crossed her legs, now covered by combat gear, and threw Fiona an amused look.

"Now, let's begin the questioning."

* * *

"We ride this thing?"

"Yeah." Treize nodded.

Lillia and Treize were inside a basement walled with stone. It was a narrow space scarcely large enough for a dozen people, lit by a yellow lightbulb. A simple staircase led up to a trapdoor on the ceiling. It was as cold as a freezer there, and each time they exhaled their breaths rose in puffs of white.

Against the wall was a small shelf littered with things like an oil lamp, gas, tins of machine oil, simple tools, gunpowder and shell casings for rifles, glass jars of all sizes, wires, and thin threads, among other things.

And in the center of the basement was a narrow set of rails less than a meter wide. It began at the buffers on one side of the room and led into a dark, gaping tunnel on the other side of the basement. They could hear a hum from the shadows, like wind was blowing inside.

A railcar stood on the tracks.

It was about 3 meters long and 1.5 meters wide. The chassis was flat and wooden, essentially a large piece of plywood. Underneath were three wheels attached to electric motors. On the railcar were four chairs in sets of two, placed back-to-back, along with handrails. There were simple compartments on the front and back for luggage, and large batteries. The railcar seemed to scream 'handmade'.

Lillia turned on the flashlight she grabbed from the shelf and pointed it at the railcar. The seats were stained with blood.

"Oh...let me wipe that," Treize said, and quickly grabbed a piece of cloth to clean off the seats. Then he turned, dejected. "I think you should wait here after all, Lillia."

Lillia wasted no time in retorting. "So you want me to fight through the blizzard outside and somehow make it back to the cottage on my own? Or are you asking me to freeze to death here in the basement?"

A sigh left Treize's mouth in a puff as he placed his gear in the compartment. The rifle was too long to fit, so he put it onto the chassis.

"Let's get to the other side first. *Then* we can come up with a plan and do something," Lillia said.

“All right. Get on.”

Treize pointed Lillia to the left-side seat that faced forward. When she sat down, he turned on his flashlight, extinguished the basement light, and sat beside her.

“W-we just have to stay sitting here, right?” Lillia asked anxiously in the shadows.

“Yeah. But the tunnel’s not that wide, so keep your arms inside. You might hurt yourself if you’re not careful.”

“O-okay. ...Dammit...” Lillia swore, clutching the handrail with a gloved hand. She shrank.

Treize relied on his flashlight to find the controller for the railcar. It was shaped like the grip of a gun with a cable protruding from the bottom. The wooden controller, which seemed to be handmade, had a lever for switching between forward and reverse functions, as well as a trigger-shaped acceleration button.

Treize held the controller in his right hand and turned off the flashlight.

“Hey! It’s pitch black in here!”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

The motors hummed in the darkness as the railcar made its way forward. It entered the tunnel at walking pace. The motors and the wheels suddenly became louder, but not enough to hurt their ears.

The railcar trembled as it continued into the darkness. It thunked loudly for the first few dozen seconds, but that soon quieted down.

About two minutes down the cold tunnel,

“C-can I ask you something?” Lillia asked, a little loudly.

“Sure.”

“H-how long do we have to go on this thing?”

“About 10 minutes. It’s not that fast—it’d be dangerous if it were.”

“And we have to stay in the dark until we get there?”

“All you’re gonna see is the tunnel and the rails anyway. Auntie probably turned out the light at the other end.”

“I see. ...Y’know, I think I just learned something new about myself...”

“Yeah?” Treize asked, surprised.

Lillia replied in a trembling voice, “I-I don’t like d-dark places and narrow places! I-I’m kinda scared!”

“So claustrophobia and nyctophobia.”

“I’m not asking for a diagnosis! How much longer do we have to stay like this?!”

“...Good luck.”

“Are you blowing me off? C-can’t this thing go any faster?”

“No. This is how it normally runs.”

“...Let’s at least turn on a light!”

“No. It’ll just be a waste of batteries.”

“Th-then we won’t even know when the rails end! What if we crash? Turn on that flashlight right now!”

“That’s not an issue, Lillia.”

“Why not?”

“Remember how the car shook a lot when we first started? It means we’re close to the end of the line. The rails were built that way on purpose. Once the railcar starts shaking again, we can turn on the light and slow down.”

“...Th-that makes sense. But! ...Ohhh...”

Lillia could not continue.

“Let’s calm down. Think about something else,” Treize said nonchalantly.

“As if that’s even possible! I was supposed to be having a good time celebrating the new year, but here I am in this pitch-black tunnel. This is all your fault, Treize!”

“...Then may I assume that you finally understand the indescribable emotion I felt when I was pushed into the lake from the seaplane last summer, Milady?” Treize asked. Lillia’s patience evaporated.

“Hey! Are you trying to start an argument here?”

“No, Milady. I simply remember that incident like it was yesterday, so I thought I should mention it. It really was the most terrifying moment of my life.”

“You would have *died* if I didn’t push you off!”

“Still, at the time I felt the same way you do now.”

“You can’t blame me for that!”

“Please, Milady. I was simply citing an example.”

“No, Treize! You sit down right there! I am going to lecture you like you wouldn’t—”

“—I’m already sitting, Milady. I happened to be fixing my collar. Terribly sorry you can’t see.”

“You’re asking for it now!”

Including the few moments Lillia spent catching her breath, her yelling and Treize’s halfhearted answering lasted several minutes.

“But—”

Finally, Treize was cut off by the railcar shaking.

“—Oh. Argument’s over.”

“Why do you always have to—what?”

“We’re almost there.”

“And?”

Treize turned on the flashlight. He could see the tunnel, lined with plywood, and the rails passing behind them.

“You can calm down now. It feels a little better now, right?”

Lillia was silent.

Treize slowed down the railcar. Soon they saw the exit by the light of the flashlight. Treize slowed the car even more.

They finally came to a stop at a basement just like the one they had departed from.

Treize scanned the room. Like before, there were stone walls and a shelf full of trinkets.

Checking that no one was there, Treize disembarked and locked the wheels.

“Are we here?” Lillia asked as she stepped off.

“Yeah.”

Lillia turned on her own flashlight and looked around. “This looks like the same place. You’d better not have brought us back.”

“If only.”

Treize turned on the basement light. Orange light filled the room. Then he pulled down his knapsack and his rifle from the railcar.

With the railcar between them, Lillia and Treize stood face-to-face.

“I’m glad no one’s in here. This storeroom’s about 100 meters from the villa, and it’s hard to see it from there because there are so many trees. And you can’t see the basement light from outside.”

“Now what? Are you still dead-set on storming the place alone?” asked Lillia.

Treize replied calmly, “No. That whole banter in the tunnel helped me clear my head.”

“R-really? That’s great. And?”

“First,” said Treize, “we’ll take some time to strategize.”

* * *

“We’ll start with your name,” said Laurie.

On the table between her and Fiona was a magnetic cassette recorder, a very recent invention. Next to it were extra batteries and several more cassette tapes.

“I am very impressed with all your new toys,” Benedict said instead of Fiona.

The recorder was about the size of a book, and was quite handy because the user did not need to manually fix the reels to the device.

“I never asked for your opinion,” Laurie said with an amused grin, and signaled Elvar.

“Excuse me,” Elvar said quietly, and whipped a leather belt across Benedict’s shoulder. *Smack.*

“Ouch!” Benedict cried in Bezelese. He twisted in his seat, his hands still bound.

“Stop this!” Fiona yelled as she turned.

“Are you talking to my subordinate? Or your babbling fool of a husband?” said Laurie.

“Please, excuse me. I will remember how my mother punished me with a bamboo ruler and be quiet,” Benedict said with a smile, sitting upright again. Elvar stood emotionlessly behind him.

Fiona turned and looked back up at Laurie.

“My name is Francesca. Francesca of Ikstova. Currently, as of the year 3306 of the World Calendar, I am the queen of this country,” she said, unafraid.

“All right, Queen Francesca,” Laurie said, “I’ll have you explain this situation in my stead.”

“...May I speak my mind, then?”

“Be my guest.”

“The guests we invited on the final day of the year 3305—the owner and the employees of Laurie Productions—violently seized control of the royal family’s villa with the weapons they smuggled inside their filming equipment, and have taken myself and about a dozen people hostage. As for why they are doing this and what they are planning next... I have no idea.” Fiona continued mechanically, “Three people have already lost their lives.”

Laurie did not even try to hide her irritation.



“Don’t patronize me. Two were your servants who put up resistance, but one was my dear subordinate.”

“I don’t care what you think. I simply counted the dead.”

“I’m sorely tempted to increase that count. Starting with you.”

“By all means, if you have the courage to jump over this table.”

“I can end it instantly with this revolver.”

“But something’s stopping you.”

“You’re right. You should be celebrating, Queen Francesca. That ‘something’ is keeping you alive.”

Benedict glanced at the man who had whipped him earlier. “Women are terrifying, no?”

“I can’t say I disagree,” Elvar muttered.

Laurie continued.

“All right, next. We of Laurie Productions were invited to the royal family’s highly exclusive annual year-end dinner under the pretense of filming the landscape of Ikstova, and are in the process of carrying out our mission. Now, let’s hear a comment from the queen about the catastrophic failings of the royal family’s security team. How do you feel?”

Fiona’s answer was immediate.

“I am ashamed. It saddens me to say that I’ll have to stop inviting guests to our year-end celebrations.”

“Excellent idea. If you’re still around to celebrate the next year, that is.”

“I’m not worried in the least. My successor will manage just fine.”

“Your daughter, Princess Meriel. Word is that she went on vacation to Sou Be-Il last month, no? A subordinate of mine read about it in the papers not too long ago. It’s a shame I never had the chance to meet her.”

“Personally, I’m quite grateful.”

“Lucky in all the wrong ways. I expected nothing less from the queen who rose from the grave.” Laurie snorted.

“Oh? I wasn’t expecting a compliment. Thank you.”

“It’s certainly an honor to behold you, Your Majesty. Oh, am I repeating what I said last year?”

“Yes. You were still a wonderful person in 3305.”

“Thank you. But remember this, Queen Francesca. The me you met in 3306—*that’s* the real me.”

Laurie rambled unnecessarily before the tape recorder. Fiona began to speak more and more in turn.

The men behind them did not try to end the conversation that seemed like useless banter.

Loosening up the suspect with small talk and suddenly popping an important question out of nowhere—that was the basic rule of questioning.

“It’s not every day I get to meet a real queen in person, so let me ask you a question.”

“Yes?”

In the very same mocking tone, Laurie finally asked the question she had been waiting for.

“What is the Treasure of Ikstova?”

* * *

In the basement of a storehouse in the snowy woods, about 100 meters from Fiona.

With a white chalk used for mechanical repairs, Treize drew a simple floor plan of the villa on the stone floor next to the railcar.

The floor was lined evenly with large stones. Treize drew one floor on each stone, three stones in a row for the entire building. Inside each square was a simple diagram.

He and Lillia squatted next to the first floor and examined the layout.

“So this is the villa.”

“For having no reference whatsoever, you sure know a lot about this place. Did your royal guard buddy tell you this too?”

“Oh, er...yeah. Can I continue?”

“Sure.”

“For starters, the queen, her husband, and the servants are locked in the villa. The intruders must be inside, too. They can’t exactly leave the place in this snowstorm.”

“Right.”

“Let me explain the layout. The villa’s basement is inside the foundation. But you can ignore it because it’s just a storage space for food and firewood.”

Treize continued, pointing at the first floor.

“In the center here you have the entrance hall and the lobby.”

Lillia scrutinized the floor plan. The front doors were at the center of the south side of the building. Straight inside was a large, square lobby. The lobby ceiling extended to the second floor.

Across from the lobby and the door were the stairs. It split into two branches in front of the landing wall and connected to the second floor hallway.

“On either side of the lobby you have rooms for the people who work there—the servants. Bedrooms, bathrooms, and laundry rooms segregated by gender. We don’t need to worry about them, either.”

Treize continued. Lillia paid close attention.

“On the north side of the first floor is the kitchen, which is the only place in the villa with a brick wall. There’s also a living room. They’re about the same size. The people in the kitchen must have been moved somewhere else after they were taken hostage, since there are potential weapons like knives in there. The living room’s probably been left alone, too. Let’s move on to the second floor.”

Lillia nodded and turned to the second floor plan.

The area above the lobby was connected to the first floor, and therefore empty. On either side were hallways and staircases overlooking the entrance hall.

And on the left side of the floor plan—the west side—were three rooms.

“This room on the left is a waiting room for guests. They can change or leave their belongings here. There’s also a guest bathroom. If the intruders are going to interrogate the queen, this is the most likely place.”

Lillia nodded gravely and repeated his words under her breath.

“Next—” Treize pointed at a large room on the north side of the floor plan. “This is the party hall, which takes up half the second floor. They always hold the new year’s eve parties here, and this is probably where the incident started. I bet they’re keeping the hostages here, too. I assume they have at least three guards stationed in case the hostages decide to fight back together. So we have to steer clear.”

Lillia nodded. “So there’s eight intruders in all, right?”

“Yeah. And if you look on the bottom right here, this storeroom is connected to the party hall. They store tables and chairs and stuff here. And at the end of the hallway are the stairs to the third floor.” Treize explained, tracing a line over the stairs with his fingertip. Then he finally jumped to the third floor.

The bottom right of the floor plan was connected to the stairs. There was a short hallway running vertically down the middle of the plan, with three rooms of different sizes around it. And one much smaller room.

“The big room on the top left is the queen and her husband’s room. It’s got a bathroom and a dressing room inside, like a hotel suite. The second-biggest room here on the right is Princess Meriel’s room. And the third-biggest one on the bottom left is—” He had been telling the truth until then, but Treize had no choice but to lie about this one. It was his own room, but he said, “It’s a recreation room for Sir Benedict.”

“A recreation room?”

“Apparently he likes aeroplanes and fishing, so they keep that kind of stuff in here. The radio we need to call for help is here. It’s inside the walk-in closet, so the intruders probably won’t notice unless they look really hard. The little room by the stairs is another storage room, so we can ignore it.”

“I see... You know so much about this villa, Treize. Maybe they should think about beefing up security?”

“Huh?”

Unable to answer, Treize simply agreed quietly.

“But I guess it’s a good thing for them this time. We just have to make it to this room here, right?” Lillia continued, pointing to Treize’s room.

“Yeah. But as you can see, the only way up to the third floor is through the stairs here on the bottom right. And we have to pass this hallway here to get up there, but it’s completely visible from the first and second floor—especially the room they’re probably using as a base. If they have even one guard posted at that landing, we’re finished. Which is probably exactly what they did, since the one guard here keeps the entire third floor secure.”

Lillia nodded. Treize circled the places he expected to find the intruders stationed.

“Let’s see...three in the party hall, one at the entrance, and at least three in the questioning room, since they’ll need one person to conduct the interrogation and two to stand guard. And then one more in front of the room. ...That’s how I’d place eight people.”

“I see. ...Say, what’s this part?”

Lillia’s finger stopped over the areas jutting outside to the north and south of the third floor.

“The balconies. The one on the south side is really narrow. The one on the north side, though...all the space jutting from the building is the balcony, so it’s pretty big. You can see all of Lake Ras from here.”

“Can’t we somehow get to the balcony of the room with the radio from the outside? They probably only have guards posted indoors, right?”

Treize thought for a moment.

“There are gutters on the walls. I could probably climb them. But—”

“But?”

“It’ll squeak like no tomorrow. There’s a lot of resonance because the villa’s made of wood. And there’s a very good chance that the guard at the door will spot me on the way because this balcony is on the same side.”

“Then what about the other side? You could cut across the third floor from the queen’s balcony.”

Lillia’s gloved finger traced a line from the queen’s balcony to the bottom of the diagram.

“Cutting across sounds fine, but getting to the balcony is the problem. I don’t think I could climb up the gutter on the north side without being caught by the guards in the party hall. And this is the lower side of the hill. The balcony here is closer to being on the fourth floor, height-wise. It’ll take me more time to go, which means I’m more likely to get caught.”

“Hmm... What does the roof look like on this building?” asked Lillia. Treize drew a sharp peak in the air.

“Like this. Like any other roof. There aren’t any houses nearby, so it’s built to let snow slide off to the east and west. There’s probably a good amount on there now.”

“Can’t we climb from the roof somehow? Climb *down* to the third floor balcony?”

Treize considered the suggestion.

A few seconds later, he shook his head.

“No...there’s a big tree nearby, but we couldn’t possibly climb up that high, and it’s too dangerous to jump to the roof from there.”

“Can’t we use a rope?”

“We don’t have any. And even if we did, we can’t throw it to the roof, either.”

“I see...”

They hung their heads in silence.

“What can we do?” Treize muttered to himself, desperate for a plan.

“Hey!” Lillia looked up. “What about the electricity? We could cut the power lines or break the control panel!”

Treize shook his head.

“I thought about that, too. I know what the place looks like, so I could move inside even in the dark.”

“Then it’s settled!”

“But we can’t do that. We won’t be able to use the radio without electricity.”

“Oh, right.”

It was just another disappointment in a series of many that night. Treize whispered self-deprecatingly, “There’s no beating a group armed with guns. You really drove that point home.”

“Yeah.”

“So if we’re caught, we’re finished. If we’re lucky they’ll take us hostage, which will put them in an even better position. And if we’re unlucky we’ll die on the spot. We can’t afford to get caught.”

“Yeah.” Lillia nodded firmly.

“We have to stay calm and think, and we’ll figure something out.”

“Yeah. Let’s keep thinking.”

They fell silent in thought.

They thought.

And thought.

About 15 seconds with nothing but puffs of breath later—

“AAAAARGH!”

Lillia exploded.

“Don’t you have *any* ideas? Anything?!”

“Calm down, Lillia. I’m just as anxious as you are.” Treize said, having himself recovered from an outburst earlier. But Lillia did not calm down.

“Damn it! Why don’t we just set the place on fire to *make* them all escape? The intruders won’t want to die, either! Then everyone will scatter, and we could rescue the hostages!”

Treize stared incredulously.

“Lillia...that’s called terrorism.”

And,

“Huh? Wait, that’s not a bad idea.”

“What? What’s not a bad idea?” asked Lillia.

“I just thought of something. Can I say it?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

Treize put his hands on Lillia’s shoulders and asked nonchalantly, as though asking her out to tea.

“Lillia, how would you like to become a terrorist bomber?”

-To be continued in Volume IV-

The Departing Knight

Long, long ago.

It was the year 3277 of the World Calendar. When Roxche (the Roxcheanuk Confederation) and Sou Be-Il (the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa), the nations on either side of the planet's only continent, began a hellish war over a tiny island on the Lutoni River.

Leaves were falling and the wind was growing chilly that autumn, when a soldier came to visit.

The building, about the size of a small school, was much too large to just call a house. It was a red-roofed structure standing quietly among trees dyed in yellows and reds. Stuck on the door beside the road was a grubby piece of plywood. The words 'Welcome to the Future House!' were written on it twice. Once in Roxchean and once in Bezelese.

"Please wait here until I've finished with my business," the soldier said to the driver, and stepped through the door.

He was a fat man in a green Roxchean uniform, and from his badge of rank he seemed to be a high-ranking officer. He was in his mid-thirties. Blue eyes and short blond hair peered out from under his hat. There was a long mustache over his lips, but it was a poor match for his looks. The tie around his thick neck seemed tight on him, and a handgun weighed on the belt around his bulging waistline.

The soldier's feet crunched over the leaves as he walked down the narrow tree-lined path to the house. Wispy clouds floated overhead that late afternoon. There was a chatter in the air, perhaps from children playing behind the building.

"Nowhere near the hustle and bustle of the city, and surrounded by nature. What a beautiful place," the soldier said to himself with a smile. When he finished, he found himself at the door. There was a small bell on it. He pulled a string attached to it.

"Hello." An apron-clad woman in her thirties stepped out with a confused look. The soldier introduced himself, and explained that he was no one suspicious and that he was very interested in the war orphans being cared for at the facility.

"Is Madame Corazòn Mut in? It would be an honor to speak to her in person."

The soldier was led into the director's office. It was at the very front of the long hallway just through the front door.

Once in the office, the soldier took off his hat and waited in a wooden chair. There was a simple office desk by the window. Next to it was a shelf filled with books and photo albums, and in the middle of the room were chairs for guests and a table. A teacup and a hat sat side-by-side on the surface. The clock on the wall ticked and tocked.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I am Corazòn Mut."

Stepping through the door was a short, chubby, and elderly woman whose slightly long grey hair was tied up in a neat bun. Her relaxed tone was a perfect match for her pleasant bearing. The woman was wearing an apron over her one-piece dress.

The soldier stood, placed his hat over his chest, and greeted the woman. The woman smiled and, meeting the soldier's blue eyes, asked him to relax. They sat on either side of the table.

The soldier introduced himself once more. He then explained that he lived and worked in the Capital District.

Then, he explained that he was very interested in the fact that the facility was founded by Corazòn Mut—who had defected from Sou Be-Il 20 years prior—and in the fact that she was looking after children orphaned by the conflicts between East and West.

He also explained that he was not visiting as part of a mission—that he happened to be in the area for work, and that he was using his own time to visit. He did not neglect to apologize to the woman for visiting out of the blue, or to thank her for agreeing to meet him.

Mut's smile never left her face as she nodded along to the soldier's words.

"Actually, I—"

But just as the soldier cut to the heart of the matter, someone knocked.

Mut excused herself and stood to open the door. A brown-haired boy stood there. He was very small and wore a light sweater and a pair of shorts. He seemed to be rather soft-spoken.

"Grandma! Ms. Leila told me to tell you as fast as I could."

The boy's words surprised the soldier. But because the soldier was very good at hiding his shock, he didn't seem any different except for how his blinking very slightly slowed.

"That's very sweet of you, Wil. Whatever is the matter?" Mut kindly asked the boy, also speaking in Bezelese—the language of Sou Be-Il. Mut's mother tongue was Bezelese to begin with.

The boy went up to Mut and told her what Ms. Leila wanted her to say. He told her that Mut could take her time speaking with the visitor and that the other teachers would take over her duties for the moment.

"Thank you, Wil. Could I ask you a favor? Could you go to Ms. Leila and tell her 'Thank you' for me?"

"Erm, okay. I'll tell Ms. Leila that you said thank you to her," the boy named Wil replied, checking the message he was supposed to convey. Then he walked to the door, stepped into the hall, took hold of the doorknob, and stopped.

He met the soldier's gaze.

The soldier flashed him a smile. The boy nodded shyly and left the room. The door thudded shut.

The soldier and Mut once more faced each other. Their eyes met.

"Today is Bezelese Day," she explained. In Roxchean this time, of course. The soldier was a little surprised, but he soon nodded.

"I suppose that boy just now has also lost his parents to war," he said gravely.

"Actually, Wil is not a war orphan," Mut replied with a smile, "He is a special case. The Future House houses war orphans, but he is an exception. He was left on our doorstep," Mut said plainly.

Silently, the soldier waited for her to continue.

"Five years ago, when Wil was about three years old, the butcher came to make a delivery in the morning and found him all alone at the door. 'Here's your usual delivery of ham. And here's a boy I found at the door. And no, you can't eat him,' he'd said. I ended up asking, 'Er...which one is the boy again?'"

Something seemed to occur to the soldier, but he did not let it show. Mut continued.

“So we decided to make an exception for him. It must have been fate—nothing like that has happened again since then.”

“Er...did you ever find out who his parents were?” asked the soldier. Mut shook her head and replied that she did not.

“But if he was three at the time—“

“At the time, Wil could not speak.”

The soldier could not reply.

“But now, he’s better at both languages than anyone. He’s a sweet, clever boy with an excellent memory. I’m very grateful to the parents who gave birth to such a wonderful child.”

“I see.” The soldier agreed, his tone dropping.

“Well, now.”

Suddenly, Mut stood. The soldier looked up in surprise. He did not want her to end the conversation there.

“Why don’t we take a walk?”

But what she meant was that they should speak where no one could overhear them.

“That sounds wonderful.”

The soldier took his hat from the table and stood.

The small, elderly woman and the tall, fat soldier.

The odd couple walked down a narrow path in the woods that was carpeted by leaves. They waved at the children playing in the backyard and walked towards the forest behind the house.

The gentle breeze sometimes became a gust and sent leaves flying. And each time, leaves rained from the sky to form another layer of the carpet.

Mut was wearing a cream-colored cardigan. A little behind her to her right walked the soldier, wearing his hat.

For over 200 meters they walked quietly, with no real conversation between them. The voices of the children no longer reached them, and there was no one around to hear them speak.

Suddenly, Mut stopped and turned. Her eyes met the soldier’s.

“I thought you’d come to kill me at first,” Mut laughed.

“What? You don’t mean—“ Very naturally, and very honestly, the soldier expressed his shock. “Not at all. Perhaps in the past, but no one in Roxche thinks badly of you now, Madame Mut,” he said firmly. But Mut lightly shook her head.

“No, that’s not it,” she said, in Roxchean up to that point. Then, “I’d thought that if I was ever visited by one of His Majesty’s men, that would be the end of my life,” she said in Bezelese.

Leaves danced in the gust, and the soldier looked as if he’d been bludgeoned in the back of the head. As though he might keel over any moment.

The soldier’s blue eyes stared, unable to even blink. He managed a gape but could not speak.

He stared at the small woman before him—the woman with the ever-present smile—as though looking up at a legendary dragon about to devour him alive. Unable to flee from her gentle gaze, he stood as though rooted to the spot.

Ten seconds passed. The leaves began to flutter to the ground.

“H-how...” The soldier managed to muster a word in Roxchean. But he was questioning himself more than the woman. Mut smiled and waited for him to finish thinking.

“How...how...?”

Ten more seconds. Eventually, the soldier lightly shook his head. His shoulders drooped as he sighed.

He had lost.

“Perhaps the air around you...or your scent, should I say? You remind me of autumn in Sfrestus. The scent of that nostalgic altitude,” Mut said softly. Sfrestus was the capital of Sou Be-II.

Having heard her speaking Bezelese, the soldier replied in Bezelese himself—without so much as a hint of an accent or dialect.

“It has been 11 years since I left our homeland, but... I see. A scent, is it?”

A smile rose to his face.

The fat man in Roxchean uniform looked Mut in the eye.

“I suppose there’s no reason to hide it now. You are correct, Madame Mut. I am in the service of His Majesty the King. As you can see from my uniform—“

Mut nodded. “You are His Majesty’s eyes and ears.”

“I am. But my mission is not to kill you. There is no such mission.”

“I wonder?” Mut said, turning away. As the soldier wondered what she intended, Mut spoke from atop the colorful carpet.

“After all, I came to this country with the help of people like you.”

Countless thoughts flashed through the soldier’s mind.

Mut had received the help of spies when she defected to Roxche. In other words, her crossing was a ruse approved by the government. But after her so-called defection, Mut did nothing of use to Sou Be-II.

“You invented a false mission to serve your true purpose of starting an orphanage. You even fooled the intelligence department,” the soldier concluded, and then added with a smile, “Incredible.”

“It is true that I betrayed His Majesty,” Mut said, finally turning back. She was smiling gently just as she did before.

The soldier replied in Roxchean, “I do not know of a mission to assassinate you. And as I said earlier, I am not here on business—I came for personal reasons.”

Mut also spoke in Roxchean.

“Then let me hear it. Although I do have an inkling about what you are about to say.”

The soldier smiled and nodded.

“Of course. You see...I am going to die very soon.”

“Have you ever heard of punisher cannons? They are railroad guns used by the Confederation Army, manufactured mostly by Terreur Steel. They have the longest range of any weapon to ever exist. And in terms of artillery, Roxche’s technology is a good decade ahead of Sou Be-II’s. That is why I have several times been asked for information on the subject from others in my line of work. And I did pass them the information,” the soldier said.

They were neither walking nor sitting, simply standing on the narrow path. They were simply looking at each other, not even checking to see if someone was approaching. There was another gust of wind, and the leaves were again rearranged.

“The conflict on Lestki Island is at a stalemate, with both sides losing and reclaiming the same few trenches over and over again. All fatalities are military personnel, and neither side wishes for the conflict to escalate. They do not want to deploy men to match the Great War’s scale or clash head-on across the entire Lutoni. This is what analysts have concluded. No... I suppose this *was* what analysts concluded.”

“I assume something must have happened?”

“Yes. Last month, Terreur Steel successfully manufactured a trial version of a new model of railroad guns and ammunition. The new models have greatly increased range, and depending on the conditions, they could double the current range—in other words, reach distances up to 100 kilometers. If these weapons were to be placed en masse along the Lutoni River, allowing Roxche to launch a one-sided attack from a further distance than before, Sou Be-Il will be left at a massive disadvantage. And those who have the upper hand are bound to become more ambitious. Ambition is like a flame. Once it ignites, even the one who started it will be unable to control it.”

“Please, continue.”

“I plan to take that information and cross the Lutoni again. I will soon obtain the detailed blueprints and intelligence on the potential placement of the weapons. I will bring them with me to Lestki Island and die in these very clothes. It is a risky gamble, but if my plan is successful, Sou Be-Il will be able to develop railroad guns of similar specifications shortly. Then we would intentionally leak that information to Roxche. Once that happens, even in the worst-case scenario the deaths will be restricted to the island alone.”

Another gust of wind scattered the leaves. The soldier’s expression darkened.

“I have a daughter who lives with me in the Capital District. My wife passed away of an illness.”

“Of course.” Mut did not need to hear the rest before she nodded firmly. “Of course. I—we—will raise her here. Please, follow your beliefs. Do what you must.”

The man knelt before the woman, who was so much shorter and smaller than he. Dirt and leaves soiled the edges and knees of his uniform, but he could not care less. The man took off his hat. And he bowed his head.

“Thank you. Now I am free of the last of my worries.”

Surprised and taken aback, Mut stared at the soldier.

“Please, rise. I no longer have the right to give my blessings to a knight in His Majesty’s service.”

The soldier looked up. “I am no knight.” He smiled, his eyes narrowing sadly.

“In that case...do allow me to give you my blessings,” Mut replied. She rifled through the pockets of her dress and her cardigan and drew a long pencil with a broken tip. “I picked this up earlier. I don’t have a sword, so this will have to do.”

Taking the blunt end of the pencil, she quietly laid its broken tip on the man’s right shoulder. Then on his left.

“May the divine protection of the God of War and the God of Fortune be upon you forevermore.”

In the swirling leaves, they walked back toward the house.

“Is she clever and calm, just like you?” Mut asked.

The soldier shook his head.

“Not at all. She is single-minded, clumsy, and passionate about everything. Sometimes to the point of being rambunctious. Please don’t let her hurt the other children.”

Mut chuckled.

“Oh my. I’m looking forward to meeting this daughter of yours. What is her name?”

“Allison,” The soldier replied. He looked so very happy when he said her name. Then he explained that his late wife had given their daughter that name, and that Allison looked just like her mother but had none of her character.

“She is my most precious treasure—is what I’d like to say, but that isn’t entirely true. Allison is no possession of mine. She is a person. Please, let her walk whatever path she chooses for her future. I will work to make sure that her path will not be ended. I will do all I can to prepare a future for her.”

Mut saw off the soldier at the door.

The fat soldier slowly disappeared along the tree-lined path.

“Grandma.”

The boy from earlier opened the door and came outside. He clung to Mut’s right side. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Grandma, what did he want?” asked the boy.

Mut answered, “To find out something.”

“To find out what?”

“If he could do what he’s going to do.”

“If he could do what? What’s he going to do?”

“He’s going to make a very important choice. One day, Wil, you might end up having to do something similar. But if you’ve chosen that path for yourself, follow your beliefs. I hope that, when that time comes, someone will be next to you to give you a smile and a nod.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I suppose it might be a little hard to understand right now. Just remember—don’t try to put on a strong front, and don’t make excuses. Be true to yourself, just like you are now. There’s no nobler way to live.”

“Huh...”

As they spoke, the soldier grew more and more distant. He would soon step past the gate and into the road, where his car waited.

“Look, Wil. A departing knight,” Mut said out of the blue.

“A knight? Like with a ‘k’? What does a knight do?”

“A knight swears loyalty to people, does things for people, and never betrays them. A knight is someone very noble.”

“Is that man a knight?”

“Yes, Wil. Look. He is a departing knight.”

“Who does he trust? Who doesn’t he betray? What does he do? For who?”

“For almost everyone in this world.”

“Huh. Someone who does things for people and never betrays them. Someone very noble,” the boy repeated the words like a spell. Then he broke away from Mut, and facing forward, took three hopping steps back.

“What is it, Wil?” Mut asked, turning. Wil asked her to look forward.

“Oh, I see. Let’s watch him until the end.”

Mut turned back to the soldier. He was just passing through the gate.

Watching the large soldier, tiny in the distance, and the small Mut, large before him, Wil whispered to himself,

“There are two of them. Two knights.”



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